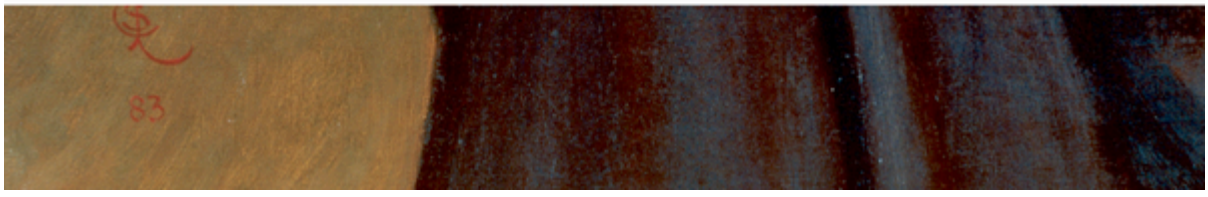
Wilkie Collins
No Name

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



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WILKIE COLLINS

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Edited with an Introduction and Notes by VIRGINIA BLAIN

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Introduction

Virginia Blain

Wilkie Collins published more than thirty novels during a long writing career spanning the forty years from midcentury until his death in 1889. Yet his reputation has rested for over a century upon only two, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), and even these have achieved classic status rather as tales of mystery and suspense than as 'serious' Victorian novels. As a result of the popular misconception that Collins was uniquely a writer of mystery stories, some of his other works have been almost entirely lost from view. *No Name* is one of the liveliest and most interesting of these lesser-known novels.

Written in the wake of the popular success of *The Woman in White, No Name* tackled a social issue more controversial than that of illegal incarceration in lunatic asylums. As its title implies, this novel revolves upon the issue of illegitimacy, dealing through a complicated plot with the social and moral stigma attaching to 'nameless' female children. From our late twentieth-century viewpoint, its interest is enhanced both by the complexity of its narrative structure and by the particular historical significance of its characterization of women. Collins's heroines tend to be much livelier than those of Dickens, for example, but in the past such a difference was not felt to be especially remarkable. Similarly, the complicatedness of Collins's plots has always been noted, but this characteristic has more often been regarded as a sign of superficiality than as a testimony to sophisticated narrative strategies. In the light of recent critical developments, *No Name* is certainly high on the list of novels calling out for a fresh assessment.

It is well known that Collins himself had no patience with professional critics, preferring to trust to the responses of his large reading public. 'I don't attach much importance to the reviews,' he wrote to Tinsley (publisher of *The Moonstone)* in 1868, '—except as advertisements which are inserted for nothing. But the impression I produce on the general public of readers is the lever that will move any-thing—provided the impression is favourable. If this book does what my other books have done, in the way of *stimulating the first circle of readers among whom it falls*—that circle will widen to a certainty.'[1] At the time of its first publication, *No Name* was viewed patronizingly by critics as merely a good story relying rather too heavily on its ingenious plot,[2] even though in his Preface Collins had insisted that his new novel, unlike *The Woman in White,* eschewed the element of mystery: 'The only Secret con-tained in this book, is revealed midway in the first volume.'

There is, however, more than one aspect of plot to be considered here. Apart from the use of suspense—the 'detective story' element—there is a subtler technique operating, whereby melodramatic incident becomes the vehicle for certain aspects of characterization. In denying that his primary aim in *No Name* was to interest readers in the kind of plot that had proved so successful in *The Woman in White,* Collins perhaps meant to draw attention to this subtler side, what he calls 'the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about' (Preface); in other words, the unconscious motivating influences upon character. In so doing, however, he was disingenuous, as even in this 'non-secretive' novel there is a firm emphasis on suspense, arising from the actions of the characters themselves, several of whom are arch-plotters. As G. Robert Stange has pointed out, Collins proves adept in this novel at balancing a succession of plots and counter-plots with which the characters attempt to ensnare each other, and which grip the reader's interest far more deeply than the

outcome of the main plot. 'It would not be far wrong,' Stange wrote, 'to say that the subject of *No Name* is *plotting*. It is a tale of trappers trapping trappers, devised by a novelist who, we are continually reminded, is himself an addictive contriver.'[3]

Certainly the text of *No Name* displays a powerful inter-weaving of the two aspects of plotting: that is, it demonstrates the special ways in which melodrama can mediate character (and vice versa) while at the same time taking every opportunity for suspenseful endings, whether of short serial episodes (in its first version) or of the three volumes (in its subsequent edition). The shape of three volumes lay dormant within the first (serial) version, invisible until their publication revealed what had been there all along: three well-shaped sections, each with its own inner balance between suspense and climax. So while it is true that this novel gives a new importance to psychological observation, it can still be seen that Collins took great care to suit the design of its plot both to his medium and to his readership. As he makes clear in the letter to Tinsley cited above, he was well aware of the importance of engaging the commitment of the 'first circle' (that is, the readers of the serial version), from whose verbal testimony would spring subsequent sales of the book. And no one knew better than Collins how to produce a 'cliff-hanger' at the end of a weekly instalment. Many episodes in the serial version (published in Dickens's journal *All The Year Round)* end on an upward note of tension or alarm. A significant example occurs in the fortieth episode, which ends like this:

> She had read to that point, to that last word and no farther, when a hand passed suddenly from behind her between the letter and her eye, and gripped her fast by the wrist in an instant.
>
> She turned with a shriek of terror; and found herself face to face with old Mazey [p. 672].

In the volume edition, there is not even a chapter break at this point, yet as the ending to the last pre-Christmas number (20 December 1862), it was clearly designed to sharpen readers' appetites to the point where they might be prepared to buy the book as a Christmas present rather than wait for its ending to be slowly revealed over four more episodes.

Unfortunately, however, plans went awry. Increasing illness towards the end of the year slowed Collins's writing schedule to such an extent that he was not working far enough ahead of time to have his book finished for pre-Christmas publication. It was not until Christmas Eve that he could put down his pen and say 'Done!', as he expressed it in a note to his friend and doctor, Francis Carr Beard, to whom the novel in its volume form is dedicated.[4] Even so, the three-volume edition was on sale only one week later (31 December)—an impressive feat by today's publishing standards.

The first edition of 4,000 copies was sold out on the day of issue. However, this testifies more to Collins's marketing management than to the novel's popularity, for the bulk of the sale was a pre-arranged (and, as it proved, over-optimistic) order from Mudie's Library. Marketing management was an important aspect of professionalism for any writer who hoped to make a living, and Collins, like Dickens, prided himself on his ability to negotiate favourable terms with publishers. He was actually paid the record price of •3,000 for the volume publication by Sampson Low, news of which he relayed excitedly in a letter to his mother on 12 August 1862:

My dear Mother,

… I have only today completed the sale of the copyright of "No Name". Low has outbidden everybody—and has offered the most liberal price that has ever been given for the reprinting of a work already published periodically—no less a sum than *Three Thousand pounds*!! Add to this, the receipts from "All The Year Round" and from America, and the amount reaches *Four thousand, six hundred.* Not so bad, for story-telling![5]

In fact it was desperately necessary that *No Name* should achieve financial success, for in 1862 Collins was living absolutely hand to mouth, unable to leave his seaside lodgings (taken for the sake of his health) until he had received a publisher's advance with which to setde his bill.[6] In addition, his constant bouts of ill-health were a serious disadvantage to a writer dependent for his livelihood on serial publication; it was during this period that he was prescribed the large doses of laudanum which began a lifelong addiction to opium. Of course, as editor and friend, Dickens gave Collins a great deal of support at this period of difficulty, even offering at one point, when it looked as though Collins might be forced to miss an episode, to 'come to London straight, and do your work. I am quite confident that, with your notes, I could take it up at any time and do it.'[7] This, however, was not to be borne, and Collins managed to muster strength sufficient to finish his novel himself.

Another well-meant but galling interference from Dickens had come in the shape of advice about the title of *No Name.* When Collins intimated that he was having trouble finding a suitable tide, Dickens dashed off a list of twenty-seven possibilities, all of which Collins rejected.[8] In fact he never again actively sought Dickens's advice in the way he had done during the early part of the writing of *No Name*—which suggests that with the success of this novel he came to feel himself secure in his own professionalism.

One last instance of this professionalism is worth noting here. As well as conceiving *No Name* simultaneously as serial and three-decker (and of course as the unified whole afforded ultimately by a single volume), Collins also had in mind from the beginning a plan to turn it into a stage play. Again, the form of the work appears to encapsulate this potential, divided as it is into a series of 'Scenes', punctuated by groups of letters. Each of the eight Scenes has a different setting, extending the action from its prelapsarian beginning in rural Somerset as far afield as Dumfries in Scotland, taking in the ancient walls of York, the eroding coast of Suffolk and the misty Essex marshes, as well as several seedy locations in London.

The most interesting effects of these different settings arise from the ways in which they form images of Magdalen's changing state of mind. Partly because of this, and although the air of melodramatic theatricality surrounding many of the important scenes in the novel might have led Collins to believe that he had written a work which would translate effortlessly to the stage, he found when he attempted the task of converting *No Name* into a play that his material was strangely resistant to such treatment. After many frustrating and fruiless attempts he gave it up, handing the job over to an actor friend, Wybert Reeve, whom he allowed to maul the original story considerably, by greatly reducing the number of characters and completely rearranging the plot.[9] Paradoxically, however, this apparent thwarting of his purpose points to a characteristic of his best fiction that is overlooked by those critics who too easily dismiss his work as containing little of interest beyond a clever plot.

In the translation of *No Name* to the stage, where it was never a success,[10] the almost caricatured aspects of its art were emphasized, while the subtleties that reside in the detail were lost. This indicates the inadequacy of any view of this novel which concentrates on its undoubted dramatic highpoints at the cost of undervaluing its intricate arrangement of characters, actions and settings into complex and dynamic patterns. One major example of such a lost subtlety in the stage version is, ironically enough, an extended reference in the text to a famous stage play, Sheridan's *The Rivals.*

Its use early in the novel as a 'play within a play' appears at first to be merely contrived as a surface effect, but turns out to have particularly suggestive ramifications. It is while the Vanstones are still happily settled in their family home, Combe-Raven, in Somersetshire, quite unconscious of the disasters in store for them, that the Marrables appear on the scene to propose the private theatricals that are destined to throw the novel's heroine, Magdalen Vanstone, and her spineless opposite, Frank Clare, so closely together, and thus indirectly to precipitate the chain of catastrophes that animates the plot.

'Miss Marrable was that hardest of all born tyrants—an only child. She had never granted a constitutional

privilege to her oppressed father and mother, since the time when she cut her first tooth' (p. 46). She has no difficulty at all in persuading Magdalen to undertake the part of Lucy in the play, while Magdalen cajoles the passive Frank into the apt role of Faulkland.

While on one level the element of plot contrivance in the introduction of these theatricals is obvious, and indeed heavily emphasized by hints such as: 'What did it mean? … Had the idle theatrical scheme, now that it was all over, graver results to answer for than a mischievous waste of time?' (p. 65–6), on another level, they also have a covert role in foreshadowing the outcome of the story. For when, through the untimely withdrawal of another member of the cast, Magdalen, who plays the pert and cunning Lucy, is asked at short notice to double in the role of the noble and long-suffering Julia, we can read more into the change than simply the opportunity thus afforded her to demonstrate the surprising range of her histrionic powers. The part of Lucy the maid initially allotted to Magdalen is a small one, though crucial both to the outcome of the plot of *The Rivals* and to its cynicism. Once it is doubled with the part of Julia, the two moral extremes of Sheridan's play—and Collins's novel—are spanned in one person. The fact that Magdalen's natural talent for drama enables her to act both these extremes so convincingly is not only a foreshadowing of her future playing of parts but also an implicit comment on the whole notion of doubleness which underpins *No Name* and which, in Collins's next novel, *Armadale,* was to be developed to its extreme.

In the socially conscious text of *No Name,* the dishonesty of Sheridan's Lucy is tempered by our awareness of her exploited class position, while Julia's saintly submissiveness in the face of masculine absurdity takes on the negative aura of passive aggression. These modulations are never spelt out in the novel, but emerge implicitly through the deployment of parallel and contrast. In taking on the roles of both characters, Magdalen thus gives expression not only to her own potential for 'good' (Julia) or 'bad' (Lucy) behaviour, but also to the possibility that each of these extremes contains within itself the seeds of its own reversal. Such a deconstructed opposition between 'good' and 'bad' behaviour adds a dimension of subtlety to the text belied by the conventional binary oppositions of melodrama. Appro-priately enough, the character of Magdalen herself is the one most nearly affected by this complex interplay of contrasting and parallel forces, for the duality of her early role in *The Rivals* is echoed in all her subsequent behaviour.

In her relationship with Frank, for instance, so like Faulkand in his peculiar brand of hypocritical selfishness, Magdalen re-enacts the part of Julia against the grain of her nature. But with Noel Vanstone, in some senses Frank's double, she has the opportunity to wreak revenge in a Lucy-like way, and she does so with admirable singlemindedness. That she is unaware of the similarity between the two men which, while never explicit, is so evident to the reader, adds immeasurably to the suggestiveness of Magdalen's dual relationship with them both. It is as though, at some deep level, Magdalen chooses to marry Noel Vanstone not just to further her plan of revenge but also as a kind of masochistic continuation of her lost relationship with Frank. Both men demand from her a denial of her strength and selfhood that she accepts blindly in the one case, where sexual attraction is a strong factor, but from which she shrinks with abhorrence in the other.

One of Collins's greatest strengths as a writer lies in his ability to take stereotypes and remould them, thereby giving them a twist into some new and unexpected shape which reflects mockingly back on to received social opinions. It is in his characterization rather than in his overt social commentary that Collins best succeeds in the role of subversive. While it is true that his relish for melodrama is not always viewed sympathetically by modern readers, it would be a pity if the exaggerations in his style were allowed completely to overshadow other aspects of his art which, in a subtler way, also have their roots in melodrama. Magdalen's sister Norah, for instance, although acting the stereotyped part of foil in her conventional 'goodness' (Magdalen uses her as a model for Julia), is shown to be not only morally unimpeachable, but also both dreary and annoying: 'Whether the motive was pride, or sullenness, or distrust of herself, or despair of doing good, the result was not to be

mistaken—Norah had resolved on remaining passive for the future' (p. 75). But quite apart from Norah, Collins dishes up a wonderful feast of minor characters in *No Name,* many of whom take life from the ironic variations played on a stock theme.

The wily adventurer Captain Wragge provides one example. With his curly lips and parti-coloured eyes (one green, one brown), he enters the novel as a conventional confidence trickster, trying to extract riddance-money from Mrs Vanstone whom he deviously claims as a relative. But as his character unfolds and, more importantly, as his relationship with Magdalen develops, further dimensions are revealed. A self-confessed swindler—or, as he prefers to call it, 'moral agriculturist' (' "Consult my brother agriculturists in the mere farming line—do they get their crops for the asking? No! they must circumvent arid Nature, exactly as I circumvent sordid man" ' (p. 212))—he lives his life as a parodic form of the capitalist businessman. Obsessed with recordkeeping, his accounts of his swindling deals are models of neatness and accuracy: 'everything down in black and white'. Thus he boasts to Magdalen as he shows her what he calls his 'commercial library' of ledgers and accounts:

> 'Kindly throw your eye over any one of them. I flatter myself there is no such thing as a blot or a careless entry in it from the first page to the last. Look at this room—is there a chair out of place? Not if I know it! Look at *me.* Am I dusty? am I dirty? am I half shaved? Am I, in brief, a speckless pauper, or am I not? Mind! I take no credit to myself; the nature of the man, my dear girl—the nature of the man! [p. 214]'

A comic contrast is set up between Wragge and his wife, the moon-faced giantess with eyes of mild and faded blue (supposedly the model for Lewis Carroll's White Queen), who simultaneously towers over him and cowers beneath the lash of his tongue:

> 'Tea, captain?' inquired Mrs Wragge, looking submissively down at her husband, whose head when he stood on tiptoe barely reached her shoulder…. 'Mrs. Wragge is not deaf,' explained the captain. 'She's only a little slow. Constitutionally torpid—if I may use the expression. I am merely loud with her (and I beg you will honour me by being loud too) as a necessary stimulant to. her ideas' [p. 203].

Yet the characterization of the Wragges reaches beyond a comedy of stereotypes as their fortunes become entangled with Magdalen's. Although she and Captain Wragge initially join forces out of mutal self-interest, he gradually realizes that he is out of his depth in the strong current of her private obsession with revenge. Once he learns of her plan to ensnare Noel Vanstone into a marriage which will be far more abhorrent to her than to him, even Wragge's cynicism is shaken. Nevertheless, the comedy of his duel of wits with Vanstone's wily housekeeper and protector, Mrs Lecount, is masterly in its balance of humour and tension. Wragge primes himself with absurdly literal facts drawn from a well-known children's science textbook in order to disarm her wariness by pandering to her pride in her late husband's unappreciated scientific achievements. But the comedy gives way eventually to a darker mood, culminating in Magdalen's complete withdrawal from Wragge into a private world of torment and suicidal despair. Although his original plan had been to exploit her needs for his financial gain, in the end it is she who has the upper hand and routs him from the field. He is defeated not by her wits, which scorn his use of cunning, but by her passion, against which he has no weapons.

Another characteristic of Collins's unusual treatment of stereotypes in this novel is the play he makes with suggested or shadow parallels which are effective in their very understatement. For instance, the weak and vacillating Frank Clare, Magdalen's first love, emerges in an unexpectedly sinister light when we gradually become aware of similarities between him and the pale and repellent Noel Vanstone whom Magdalen forces herself to marry. Then again, just as her maid Louisa both draws forth and echoes certain of Magdalen's better qualities, thus emphasizing their female fellowship in misfortune, so the very different Mrs Lecount mirrors some of Magdalen's darker, more obsessive traits through a well-matched clash of wills. Indeed, the shadowy pairing of these two seemingly contrary characters is particularly telling.

Mrs Lecount is much more experienced than Magdalen: she is older, and her cold, manipulative cleverness seems at first the antithesis of Magdalen's volatility. Their first meeting, with Magdalen protected by a disguise and Mrs Lecount by a sinister pet toad, is a suitably guarded one. It sets them up as worthy adversaries for each other.

> Snails clung to the sides of the tank… on top of the pyramid, there sat solitary, cold as the stone, brown as the stone, motionless as the stone, a little bright-eyed toad….
>
> 'Don't be alarmed,' said a woman's voice behind her. 'My pets hurt nobody.'
>
> Magdalen turned, and confronted Mrs Lecount… . She found herself in the presence of a lady of mild ingratiating manners, whose dress was the perfection of neatness, taste, and matronly simplicity… . 'And to what circumstances am I indebted for the honour of this visit?'
>
> 'May I inquire, first, if my name happens to be familiar to you?' said Magdalen, turning towards her as a matter of necessity—but coolly holding up her handkerchief, at the same time, between her face and the light [p. 277].

Seeing through each other almost instantly, they artfully pretend otherwise, and a good deal of tension builds up for the reader as the battle of wits develops.

On the surface there seems to be no possibility of claiming a parallelism between Magdalen and Mrs Lecount. The former so young, so passionate, so idealistic; the latter so experienced, so well-preserved, so shrewdly calculating. Yet the very dynamic of their interaction as adversaries sets up a pattern in which their behaviour comes to mirror each other's. Both find strength through an inordinate sense of pride and an inflexible sense of purpose; both are highly intelligent and by nature independent, although reduced by circumstances to dependency on men they despise; both are obsessed with their own rights and with receiving what they know to be justice. ' "The widow of Professor Lecompte, sir, takes what is justly hers—and takes no more!" ' declares Mrs Lecount (p. 562), while Magdalen too is constant in her determination to reap no more than that which she perceives to be her due as her father's daughter. By setting up patterns of analogy between two such seemingly opposite characters, the novel draws attention to the power of those social and economic forces in mid-nineteenth-century England which ensured the dependency on men of even the most courageous, unconventional and independent-minded of women.

The radicalism of Collins's treatment of women in *No Name* has never been fully appreciated. William Marshall has made the claim that: 'Viewed mythically, the Vanstone girls' disinheritance is essentially that of modern man.'[11] It would be more appropriate to see it as the disinheritance of Victorian woman. The dynamic of the novel works in such a way as to illustrate paradigmatically the illegitimacy not only of Magdalen and her sister, but of the claims of any woman in that society to autonomous and self-initiated action. Illegitimacy, with its connotations of allowing no legal inheritance or possession of property, no given social class, no status as a responsible person in the eyes of the law, no legal name, serves here as an evocative and subversive metaphor for the position of all women as nonpersons in a patriarchal and patrilineal society.

In that extraordinary section of the book where Collins presents the relationship between Magdalen, raised in the lap of luxury, and her maid Louisa, downtrodden and disregarded, as one of mutual trust and care between two outcast women, he gives words to Magdalen by which she implicitly recognizes that society allows no status to women as persons in their own right. Only through relationship with a man can a woman claim to belong to any particular class in society. As she says to her maid: ' "I ask you to sit near me … because I wish to speak to you on equal terms. Whatever distinctions there might once have been between us, are now at an end. I am a lonely woman thrown helpless on my own resources, without rank or place in the world" ' (pp. 602–3). Her father and husband dead, and with no legal inheritance from either, Magdalen has been turned into a non-person. In showing her refusal to submit to this, or to accept it as anything other than injustice, Collins

comes much closer to a true sympathy with the plight of women in Victorian society than Dickens ever did.

At this time, however, the close link with Dickens was still particularly important for Collins, not so much in its mentor-pupil aspect, which is how Dickens saw it, but rather in giving impetus to one of this novel's major themes. It is almost as though Collins wanted to conduct a literary debate with Dickens, begun in *Hide and Seek* (1854), for in again choosing an illegitimate girl as his heroine, he invited further comparison with Dickens's controversial treatment of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House,* first published eight years earlier in 1852–3. Far less sexually reticent in his novels than Dickens, Collins presents Magdalen Vanstone to his readers in terms of unmistakable promise:

> The girl's exuberant vitality asserted itself all over her, from head to foot. Her figure—taller than her sister's, taller than the average of woman's height; instinct with such a seductive, serpentine suppleness, so lightly and playfully graceful, that its movement suggested, not unnaturally, the movements of a young cat—her figure was so perfectly developed already that no one who saw her could have supposed that she was only eighteen. She bloomed in the full physical maturity of twenty years or more—bloomed naturally and irresistably, in right of her matchless health and strength [p. 14].

When she is thrust into the world from the protecting shelter of her early home, and faced with the prospect of struggling for her living under the degrading shadow of her recently discovered illegitimacy, Magdalen—unlike Esther, or her own sister Norah—is not one to turn the other cheek. Although she, like them, feels deeply the shame of the social stigma conferred on illegitimate children (and females seem/ to have borne a more indelible mark of 'inherited' moral and sexual taint), she refuses to take upon herself any guilt for her position. In this refusal lies her extraordinary power, and it is the dangerous attraction of this power that Collins explores in his development of her story. Yet in the end her power deserts her, and she succumbs to a debilitating illness followed closely by a new, and we assume more lasting, romantic attachment.

For, bold as Collins might have been in creating a strong heroine who defies society by fighting for what she believes to be her rights, he shrank from allowing her to win a victory entirely on her own terms. In the end she must be 'rescued' by the love of a good man, in itself a nice reversal of her mother's early 'rescue' of her father from a life of debauchery, and indeed a reversal of the predominant pattern in Victorian novels, where it is generally in the female characters that the saving moral graces lie. Yet it is the ending that most disappoints a modem reader of *No Name.* For quite opposite reasons, it disappointed—or, rather, scan-dalized—Victorian readers as well.

That the 'bad' Magdalen, who fought for her rights in what was, in Victorian terms, an entirely disreputable manner (by consciously trading on the power of her sexuality), should be rewarded with a happy and respectable marriage was regarded by the reading public as highly distasteful—so much so that the book was far less successful than *The Woman in White.* As Mrs Oliphant expostulated in an unsigned review in *Blackwood's Magazine'.*

> Mr. Wilkie Collins, after the skilful and startling complications of the *Woman in White*—his grand effort—has chosen, by way of making his heroine piquant and interesting in his next attempt, to throw her into a career of vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness, with which it is impossible to have a shadow of sympathy, but from all the pollutions of which he intends us to believe that she emerges, at the cheap cost of a fever, as pure, as high-minded, and as spotless as the most dazzling white of heroines . .. after all her endless deceptions and horrible marriage, it seems quite right to the author that she should be restored to society, and have a good husband and happy home.[12]

That Mrs Oliphant and her kind were not fooled by the novel's final gesture towards propriety is, to a modem view, less a testimony to its failure than to its success. Clearly Collins had succeeded in touching some very sensitive nerves in his portrayal of Magdalen Vanstone. For the subversive, 'sinful' and lively side of this

character, given so much space and animated with so much energy earlier in the novel, cannot be easily wiped out for the reader by a ‘safe’ moral conversion at the end. It is not in the superimposed black and white simplicities that our interest lies. Rather, it is in the detailed elaboration of an array of counterpointed similarities and contrasts between characters that the richest and most living parts of the novel take shape.

Virginia Blain

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1 From the letter to W. Tinsley Esq., dated Saturday 11 July 1860. The major portion of this letter is held in the collection at the Pierpont Morgan Library, whose Trustees have kindly given permission for this and subsequent quotations.

2 E.g.: ‘Mr. Wilkie Collins has again produced one of his ingenious puzzles. He has worked out once more a novel that is plot and nothing else but plot’, from an unsigned review in *Saturday Review,* reprinted with others in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage,* ed. Norman Page (London, 1974), p. 136.

3 See G. Robert Stange’s review of the Dover reprint of the American edition of *No Name* in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* 34, 1, (1979—80), p. 97.

4 The letter, dated Tuesday 24 December 1862, gives the exact time of completion as ‘two o’clock this morning’. This letter is held in the Morris Parrish Collection in Princeton University Library and is quoted here with the Library’s kind permission.

5 This letter is in the Pierpont Morgan Library.

6 This emerges from a letter written to his friend Charles Ward, in London, from ‘The Fort house, Broadstairs’, dated 14 October 1862, asking him to ‘kindJy look at my account … to see whether Low has remembered to pay in •125… before I pay for the Fort House’. The letter is in the Pierpont Morgan Library.

7 See the letter dated ‘Tuesday Night, October 14th, 1862’, printed in *Letters of Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins 1851–1870*, selected by Miss Georgina Hogarth, ed. Laurence Hutton (London, 1892], p. 135.

8 > Some examples of Dickens’s suggestions are: *The Twig and the Tree:, Behind the Veil; Working in the Dark; Magdalen Vanstone; The Combe Raven Tragedy.* For the complete list, see Georgina Hogarth’s selection of Dickens’s letters cited above, pp. 121–2.

9 See the account in Kenneth Robinson’s *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (London,1951), p.174

10 Robinson (see note above) claims that the only recorded performances of *No Name* took place in Melbourne, Australia. But according to the *Newcastle Daily Journal* of the time, *No Name* was produced in Newcastle upon Tyne on 26 October 1877, without any indication in the advertisement that this was to he a single performance.

11 William H. Marshall, Wilkie Collins (New York, 1970), p. 69.

12 Page, op. cit., p. 143.

Note on the Text

Virginia Blain

No Name was first issued in serial form in *All the Year Round* in forty-four episodes between 15 March 1862 and 17 January 1863. The three-volume edition was published on 31 December 1862 by Sampson Low, Son, and Co. Collins had intended to complete the novel in time for Christmas publication, but was prevented by the illness which had plagued him throughout the second half of the year. Writing against time, often in severe pain, he only put the last words to *No Name* in the early hours of 24 December 1862.[1]

Possibly because of his illness, the serial version was not much revised for the three-volume edition. One notable exception occurs in the First Scene, Chapter XIII, where Collins appears to have made an over-hasty correction of a serious legal error bearing on the plot. An account of this change is given in the Notes. Otherwise the revisions were mainly stylistic, tending to minor local effect rather than major significance. Some heavy hints of foreboding were removed, however, and in the same Chapter XIII an important clue was inserted. The young Andrew Vanstone's saviour from among his superior officers, anonymous in the serial version, was named as Major Kirke; the way was thus paved for the reader to make an early connection between him and his son, the Captain Kirke who redeems Vanstone's daughter.

The 1862 edition had very extensive library sales and as a result was virtually sold out on the first day of issue. Collins was paid what was then considered the extremely large sum of •3000 for the book by Sampson Low, following the enormous success of *The Woman in White* in 1860. The 'new edition' of 1863 was a re-issue of the 1862 edition in the same three-volume format, but in 1864 a one-volume edition was published, again by Sampson Low. This edition corrects some printer's errors but there is no evidence to show that Collins made any revisions himself. He did, however, persuade John Millais to produce a fine steel engraving for the frontispiece.

The manuscript

The complete holograph manuscript is held by the King's School, Canterbury, Kent, as part of the Hugh Walpole bequest, and I wish to thank the custodian, Mr D. S. Goodes, for his kindness in making it available to me. It consists of 571 leaves bound into a single quarto volume. Although heavily revised and difficult to read, it is marked up as printer's copy. It differs in many minor respects from the serial version and offers interesting evidence of the novel's evolution. It has long been known that Collins had peculiar difficulty in finding a suitable title for this novel: the manuscript reveals not just that he finally thought of the tide after he had written a good portion of the book (this we can deduce from letters) but that he went back and inserted passages explicitly referring to the notion of the Vanstone daughters having 'No Name' while the first serial episodes were in proof.[2] A further important source of evidence about the evolution of *No Name* lies in the correspondence with Dickens, who made detailed comments on certain sections as they were written.[3]

Dramatic adaptation

The division of *No Name* into eight 'Scenes' gives its own indication of Collins's stage orientation, and the last episodes of the serial version in *All the Tear Round* are accompanied by the following advertisement:

> The author begs to announce that he has protected his right of property (so far as the stage is concerned) in the work of his own invention, by causing a dramatic adaptation of 'No Name' to be written, of which he is the sole proprietor, and which has been published and entered at Stationer's Hall as the law directs.[4]

Owing to his illness, Collins had paid a Mr Bayle Bernard to write this version in five acts. It was formally published in 1863 and a copy deposited in the British Museum, but it was never staged. Its sole purpose was to preserve Collins's copyright, since under the law at that time a novel was not protected from pirated dramatizations unless the author had first registered his or her own adaptation. In 1870 Collins wrote his own stage version in four acts, but felt dissatisfied with it. He subsequently engaged Mr Wybert Reeve to revise it for him, and professed himself happy with the result, but it never achieved success on the stage. (See Introduction, p. xii, n. 9, above.)

The text of this edition

The text of this edition has been re-set from the 1986 World's Classics edition, which in turn was a photographic reproduction of the one-volume 1864 edition. The 1864 was a good text for such reproduction, as it corrected a number of printer's errors from the first edition (three volumes: 1862), while introducing comparatively few of its own. These errors have been corrected in the present edition: most were of the order of minor slips of punctuation, although a few were of more significance, in that they confirm an apparent lack of authorial intervention in 1864. These few are mentioned in the Explanatory Notes.

The text of 1864 was the one used for all subsequent British nineteenth-century reprints, of which there were a great number. I have compared it with the serial version of 1862–3, the three-volume edition of 1862, and the Harpers American edition of 1873. Although the 1864 text was apparently not corrected by the author, it is more authoritative than the Harpers version, which not only introduced a much larger proportion of substantive errors, but also repunctuated, often with considerable insensitivity.

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1 See the letter to Beard cited in the Introduction above (p. x. n, 4). Its evidence is important in helping to scotch the idea that the book *was* in fact published for Christmas 1862 (as, for instance, Baker claims in his 198o article referred to in n. 3 below), an idea perhaps given currency by the advertisement which appeared in the 13 December number of *All the Year Round* optimistically proclaiming *No Name* to be 'now ready' in three volumes.

2 For a fuller account see my article, 'The Naming of *No Name,* in the *Wilkie Collins Society Journal*, 4 (1984), pp. 25–9.

3 For a good discussion of the part Dickens played in shaping the novel, see the article by William Baker, 'Wilkie Collins, Dickens and *No Name' , Dickens Studies Newsletter*, II, 2 (June 1980), pp. 49–52.

4 This appeared first in the number for 27 December 1862.

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A Chronology of Wilkie Collins

Virginia Blain

	Life	***Historical and Cultural Background***
1824	(8 Jan.) Born at 11 New Cavendish Street, St Marylebone, London, elder son of William Collins, RA (1788–1847), artist, and Harriet Collins, nee Geddes (1790–1868).	Death of Byron. Scott, *Redgauntlet*
1825		Stockton-Darlington railway opened. *Hazlitt Spirit of the Age*
1826	(Spring) Family moves to Pond Street, Hampstead	
1827		Death of Blake; University College London founded.
1828	(25 Jan.) Brother, Charles Allston Collins, born.	Birth of Meredith, D. G. Rossetti; Catholic Emancipation Act.
1829	(Autumn) Family moves to Hampstead Square.	Balzac's *La Comedie humaine begins* publication
1830	Family moves to Porchester Terrace, Bayswater	Death of George IV and accession of William IV; July Revolution in France. Hugo, *Hernani* Tennyson, *Poems Chiefly Lyrical*
1831		British Association for the Advancement of Science founded; Britain annexes Mysore.
1832		Deaths of Bentham, Crabbe, Goethe, Scott; First Reform Bill passed
1833		Slavery abolished throughout British Empire. *Carlyle, Sartor Resartus*

1834		Deaths of Coleridge, Lamb; new Poor Law comes into effect; Tolpuddle Martyrs.
1835	(13 Jan.) Starts school, the Maida Hill Academy	Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* (1st series)
1836	(19 Sept-15 Aug. 1838) Family visits France and Italy.	
1837		Death of William IV and accession of Victoria. Carlyle, *The French Revolution* Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*
1838	(Aug.) Family moves to 20 Avenue Road, Regent's Park. Attends Mr Cole's boarding school, Highbury Place, until Dec. 1840.	Anti-Corn Law League founded; Chartist petitions published; London-Birmingham railway opened; Anglo-Afghan War Dickens, *Oliver Twist*
1840	(Summer) Family moves to 85 Oxford Terrace, Bayswater	Birth of Hardy; marriage of Victoria and Albert; penny postage introduced. Browning, *Sordello* Darwin, *Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle* Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*
1841	(Jan.) Apprenticed to Antrobus & Co., tea merchants, Strand.	Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*
1842	(June–July) Trip to Highlands of Scodand, and Shedand, with William Collins	Child and female underground labour becomes illegal; Chartist riots; Act for inspection of asylums. Browning, *Dramatic Lyrics* Comte, *Cours de philosophic positive*, Macaulay, *Lays of Ancient Rome*, Tennyson, *Poems*
1843	(Aug.) First signed publication 'The Last Stage Coachman' in the *Illuminated Magazine*.	Birth of Henry James; Thames Tunnel opened. Carlyle, *Past and Present* Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* Ruskin, *Modern Painters* begins publication

1844	Writes his first (unpublished) novel, ‘Iolani; or Tahiti as it was; a Romance’.	Factory Act. Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* Elizabeth Barrett, *Poems*
1845	(Jan.) ‘Iolani’ submitted to Chapman & Hall, rejected (8 Mar.).	Boom in railway speculation; Newman joins Church of Rome. Disraeli, *Sybil* Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*
1846	(17 May) Admitted student of Lincoln’s Inn.	Repeal of Corn Laws; Irish potato famine. Lear, *Book of Nonsense*
1847	(17 Feb.) Death of William Collins.	Ten-hour Factory Act; California gold rush. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* Tennyson, *The Princess*
1848	(Summer) Family move to 38 Blandford Square. (Nov.) First book, *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.* published.	Death of Emily Brontë Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood founded; Chartist Petition; cholera epidemic; Public Health Act; revolutions in Europe. Dickens, *Dombey and Son* Gaskell, *Mary Barton* Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*

1850	(27 Feb.) First published novel, *Antonina*. (Summer) Family move to 17 Hanover Terrace.	Deaths of Balzac, Wordsworth; Tennyson becomes Poet Laureate; Public Libraries Act. Dickens, *David Copperfield* Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke* Tennyson, *In Memoriam* Wordsworth, *The Prelude* Dickens starts *Household Words*
1851	(Jan.) Travel book on Cornwall, *Rambles Beyond Railways*, published. (Mar.) Meets Dickens for the first time. (May) Acts with Dickens in Bulwer-Lytton's *Not So Bad as We Seem*.	Death of Turner; Great Exhibition in Hyde Park; Australian gold rush. Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*
1853	(Oct.–Dec.) Tours Switzerland and Italy with Dickens and Augustus Egg.	Arnold, *Poems* Charlotte Brontë *Villette* Dickens, *Bleak House* Gaskell, *Cranford*
1854	(5 June) *Hide and Seek* published	Birth of Wilde; outbreak of Crimean War; Working Men's College founded. Dickens, *Hard Times*
1855	(Feb.) Spends a holiday in Paris with Dickens. (16 June) First play, *The Lighthouse*, performed by Dickens's theatrical company at Tavistock House. (Nov.-Dec.) *Mad Monkton serialized*.	Death of Charlotte Brontë Browning, *Men and Women* Gaskell, *North and South* Trollope, *The Warden*
1856	(Feb.) *After Dark*, a collection of short stories, published. (Feb.-Apr.) Spends six weeks in Paris with Dickens. (Mar.) *A Rogue's Life* serialized in *Household Words*. (Oct.) Joins *staff of Household Words* and begins collaboration with Dickens in *The Wreck of the Golden Mary* (Dec.).	Birth of Freud, Shaw; Crimean War ends. E. B. Browning, *Aurora Leigh*
1857	(Jan.–June) *The Dead Secret* serialized in *Household Words*, published in volume form (June). (6 Jan.) *The Frozen Deep* performed by Dickens's theatrical company at Tavistock House. (Aug.) *The Lighthouse* performed at the Olympic Theatre. (Sept.) Spends a working holiday in the Lake District with Dickens, their account appearing as *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*, serialized in *Household Words*. (Oct.) Collaborates with Dickens on *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*.	Birth of Conrad; Matrimonial Causes Act establishes divorce courts; Indian Mutiny. Dickens, *Little Dorrit* Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* Trollope, *Barchester Towers*

1858	(May) Dickens separates from his wife. (Oct.) *The Red Vial* produced at the Olympic Theatre; a failure.	Victoria proclaimed Empress of India. Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*
1859	From this year no longer living with his mother; lives for the rest of his life (with one interlude) with Mrs Caroline Graves. (Jan.–Feb.) Living at 124 Albany Street. (May–Dec.) Living at 2a Cavendish Street. (Apr.) *All the Year Round* begins publication. (Oct.) *The Queen of Hearts*, a collection of short stories, published. (26 Nov–25 Aug. 1860) *The Woman in White* serialized in *All the Year Round*. (Dec.) Moves to 12 Harley Street.	War of Italian Liberation. Darwin, *Origin of Species* Eliot, *Adam Bede* Meredith, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* Mill, *On Liberty* Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*
1860	(Aug.) *The Woman in White* published in volume form: a bestseller in Britain and the United States, and rapidly translated into most European languages.	British Association meeting at Oxford (Huxley-Wilberforce debate). Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*
1861	(Jan.) Resigns from *All the Year Round*	Death of Albert, Prince Consort; Offences Against the Person Act (includes provisions on bigamy); outbreak of American Civil War. Dickens, *Great Expectations* Eliot, *Silas Marner* Palgrave, *Golden Treasury* Reade, *The Cloister and the Hearth*
1862	(15 Mar–17 Jan. 1863) *No Name serialized in All the Year Round*, published in volume form (31 Dec.).	Clough, *Poems*
1863	*My Miscellanies*, a collection of journalism from *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, published.	Death of Thackeray. Eliot, *Romola* Huxley, *Man's Place in Nature* Lyell, *Antiquity of Man* Mill, *Utilitarianism*
1864	(Nov.–June 1866) *Armadale* serialized in *The Cornhill*. (Dec.) Moves to 9 Melcombe Place, Dorset Square	Albert Memorial constructed. Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*

1865		Birth of Kipling, Yeats; death of Gaskell. Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* (ist series) Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* Tolstoy, *War and Peace* Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*
1866	(May) *Armadale* published in two volumes. (Oct.) *The Frozen Deep* produced at the Olympic Theatre.	Birth of Wells. Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*
1867	(Sept.) Moves to 90 Gloucester Place, Portman Square. Collaborates with Dickens on *No Thoroughfare*, published as Christmas Number of *All the Year Round*; dramatic version performed at the Adelphi Theatre (Christmas Eve).	Second Reform Bill passed; Paris Exhibition. Bagehot, *English Constitution* Marx, *Das Kapital*
1868	(4 Jan.–8 Aug.) *The Moonstone* serialized in *All the Year Round*; published in three volumes (July). (19 Mar.) Mother, Harriet Collins, dies; Collins forms liaison with Martha Rudd ('Mrs Dawson'). (4 Oct.) Caroline Graves marries Joseph Charles Clow.	Report of Royal Commission on the Laws of Marriage. Browning, *The Ring and the Book*
1869	(Mar.) *Black and White*, written in collaboration with Charles Fechter, produced at the Adelphi Theatre. (4 July) Daughter, Marian Dawson, born to Collins and Martha Rudd, at 33 Bolsover Street, Portland Place.	Suez Canal opened. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* Mill, *On the Subjection of Women*
1870	(June) *Man and Wife* published in volume form. (9 June) Dickens dies. (Aug.) Dramatic version of *The Woman in White* tried out in Leicester.	Education Act; Married Woman's Property Act; Franco-Prussian War; fall of Napoleon III. D. G. Rossetti, *Poems* Spencer, *Principles of Psychology*

1871	(14 May) Second daughter, Harriet Constance Dawson, born at 33 Bolsover Street. (May) Caroline Graves again living with Collins. (Oct.) *The Woman in White* produced at the Olympic Theatre. (Oct.–Mar. 1872) *Poor Miss Finch* serialized in *Cassell's Magazine*. (25 Dec.) *Miss or Mrs?* published.	Trades unions become legal; first Impressionist Exhibition held in Paris; religious tests abolished at Oxford, Cambridge, Durham. Darwin, *Descent of Man* Eliot, *Middlemarch*
1872	(Feb.) *Poor Miss Finch* published in volume form	Butler, *Erewhon*
1873	(Feb.) Dramatic version of *Man and Wife* performed at the Prince of Wales Theatre. (9 Apr.) Brother, Charles Allston Collins, dies. (May) *The New Magdalen* published in volume form; dramatic version performed at the Olympic Theatre. *Miss or Mrs?* And *Other Stories in Outline* published. (Sept.–Mar. 1874) Tours United States and Canada, giving readings from his work.	Mill, *Autobiography* Pater, *Studies in the Renaissance*
1874	(Nov.) *The Frozen Deep and Other Stories*. (25 Dec.) Son, William Charles Dawson, born, 10 Taunton Place, Regent's Park.	Factory Act; Public Worship Act. Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*
1875	Copyrights in Collins's work transferred to Chatto & Windus, who become his main publisher. *The Law and the Lady serialized in The London Graphic*, published in volume form.	Artisans' Dwellings Act; Public Health Act.
1876	(Apr.) *Miss Gwilt* (dramatic version of *Armadale*) performed at the Globe Theatre. *The Two Destinies* published in volume form.	Invention of telephone and phonograph. Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* James, *Roderick Hudson* Lombroso, *The Criminal*
1877	(Sept.) Dramatic version of *The Moonstone* performed at the Olympic Theatre. *My Lady's Money* and *Percy and the Prophet*, short stories, published.	Annexation of Transvaal. Ibsen, *The Pillars of Society* Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*
1878	(June–Nov.) *The Haunted Hotel serialized*	Whistler-Ruskin controversy; Congress of Berlin; Edison invents the incandescent electric lamp. Hardy, *The Return of the Native*
1879	*The Haunted Hotel* published in volume form. *The Fallen Leaves—First Series* published in volume form. *A Rogue's Life* published in volume form.	Birth of E. M. Forster. Ibsen, *A Doll's House*

1880	*Fezebel's Daughter* published in volume form.	Death of George Eliot, Flaubert; Bradlaugh, an atheist, becomes an MP. Gissing, *Workers in the Dawn* Zola, *Nana*
1881	*The Black Robe* published in volume form; A. P. Watt becomes Collins's literary agent.	Death of Carlyle; Democratic Federation founded. Ibsen, *Ghosts* James, *Portrait of a Lady*
1882		Birth of Joyce, Woolf; death of Darwin, D. G. Rossetti, Trollope; Married Woman's Property Act; Daimler invents the petrol engine.
1883	*Heart and Science* published in volume form. *Rank and Riches* produced at the Adelphi Theatre: a theatrical disaster.	Deaths of Marx, Wagner. Trollope, *An Autobiography*
1884	*'ISay No'* published in volume form.	Fabian Society founded; Third Reform Bill; birth of Lawrence; Criminal Law
1885		Amendment Act (raising age of consent to 16). Maupassant, *Bel-Ami* Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* Zola, *Germinal*
1886	*The Evil Genius* published in volume form. *The Guilty River* published in *Arrowsmith's Christmas Annual*.	Irish Home Rule Act; Contagious Diseases Acts repealed. Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*
1887	*Little Novels*, a collection of short stories, published.	Victoria's Golden Jubilee; Independent Labour Party founded. Hardy, *The Woodlanders* Strindberg, *The Father*
1888	*The Legacy of Cain* published in volume form. (Feb.) Moves to 82 Wimpole Street.	Death of Arnold; birth of T. S. Eliot. Kipling, *Plain Tales from the Hills*

1889	(23 Sept.) Dies at 82 Wimpole Street.	Deaths of Browning, Hopkins; dock strike in London. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* Shaw, *Fabian Essays in Socialism* Ibsen's *A Doll's* House staged in London
1890	*Blind Love* (completed by Walter Besant) published in volume form.	Death of Newman; Parnell case; first underground railway in London. Booth, *In Darkest England* Frazer, *The Golden Bough William* James, *Principles of Psychology* Morris, *News from Nowhere*
1895	(June) Caroline Graves dies and is buried in Wilkie Collins's grave	
1919	Martha Rudd (Dawson) dies	

No Name

Wilkie Collins

dedication

to

Francis Carr Beard[*]

(Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England)

In remembrance of the time

when the closing scenes of this story were written

preface

Preface

The main purpose of this story is to appeal to the reader's interest in a subject, which has been the theme of some of the greatest writers, living and dead—but which has never been, and can never be, exhausted, because it is a subject eternally interesting to all mankind. Here is one more book that depicts the struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of Good and Evil, which we have all felt, which we have all known. It has been my aim to make the character of 'Magdalen,' which personifies this struggle, a pathetic character even in its perversity and its error; and I have tried hard to attain this result by the least obtrusive and the least artificial of all means—by a resolute adherence, throughout, to the truth as it is in Nature. This design was no easy one to accomplish; and it has been a great encouragement to me (during the publication of my story in its periodical form) to know, on the authority of many readers, that the object which I had proposed to myself, I might, in some degree, consider as an object achieved

Round the central figure in the narrative, other characters will be found grouped, in sharp contrast—contrast, for the most part, in which I have endeavoured to make the element of humour mainly predominant. I have sought to impart this relief to the more serious passages in the book, not only because I believed myself to be justified in doing so by the laws of Art—but because experience has taught me (what the experience of my readers will doubdess confirm) that there is no such moral phenomenon as unmixed tragedy to be found in the world around us. Look where we may, the dark threads and the light cross each other perpetually in the texture of human life.

To pass from the Characters to the Story, it will be seen that the narrative related in these pages has been constructed on a plan, which differs from the plan followed in my last novel, and in some other of my works published at an earlier date. The only Secret contained in this book, is revealed midway in the first volume. From that point, all the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed, before they take place—my present design being to rouse the reader's interest in following the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about. In trying this new ground, I am not turning my back in doubt on the ground which I have passed over already. My one object in following a new course, is to enlarge the range of my studies in the art of writing fiction, and to vary the form in which I make my appeal to the reader, as attractively as I can.

There is no need for me to add more to these few prefatory words than is here written. What I might otherwise have wished to say in this place, I have endeavoured to make the book itself say for me.

Harley Street,

November, 1862.

The First Scene

Combe-Raven, Somersetshire

Wilkie Collins

Chapter I

The hands on the hall-clock pointed to half-past six in the morning. The house was a country residence in West Somersetshire, called Combe-Raven. The day was the fourth of March, and the year was eighteen hundred and forty-six.*

No sounds but the steady ticking of the clock, and the lumpish snoring of a large dog stretched on a mat outside the dining-room door, disturbed the mysterious morning stillness of hall and staircase. Who were the sleepers hidden in the upper regions? Let the house reveal its own secrets; and, one by one, as they descend the stairs from their beds, let the sleepers disclose themselves.

As the clock pointed to a quarter to seven, the dog woke and shook himself. After waiting in vain for the footman, who was accustomed to let him out, the animal wandered resdessly from one closed door to another on the ground floor; and, returning to his mat in great perplexity, appealed to the sleeping family, with a long and melancholy howl.

Before the last notes of the dog's remonstrance had died away, the oaken stairs in the higher regions of the house creaked under slowly-descending footsteps. In a minute more the first of the female servants made her appearance, with a dingy woollen shawl over her shoulders—for the March morning was bleak; and rheumatism and the cook were old acquaintances.

Receiving the dog's first cordial advances with the worst possible grace, the cook slowly opened the hall door, and let the animal out. It was a wild morning. Over a spacious lawn, and behind a black plantation of firs, the rising sun rent its way upward through piles of ragged grey cloud; heavy drops of rain fell few and far between; the March wind shuddered round the comers of the house, and the wet trees swayed wearily.

Seven o'clock struck; and the signs of domestic life began to show themselves in more rapid succession.

The housemaid came down—tall and slim, with the state of the spring temperature written redly on her nose. The lady's-maid followed—young, smart, plump, and sleepy. The kitchen-maid came next—afflicted with the face-ache, and making no secret of her sufferings. Last of all, the footman appeared, yawning disconsolately; the living picture of a man who felt that he had been defrauded of his fair night's rest.

The conversation of the servants, when they assembled before the slowly-lighting kitchen fire, referred to a

recent family event, and turned at starting on this question: Had Thomas, the footman, seen anything of the concert at Clifton, at which his master and the two young ladies had been present on the previous night? Yes; Thomas had heard the concert; he had been paid for to go in at the back; it was a loud concert; it was a hot concert; it was described at the top of the bills as Grand; whether it was worth travelling sixteen miles to hear by railway, with the additional hardship of going back nineteen miles by road, at half-past one in the morning—was a question which he would leave his master and the young ladies to decide; his own opinion, in the mean time, being unhesitatingly, No. Further inquiries, on the part of till the female servants in succession, elicited no additional information of any sort. Thomas could hum none of the songs, and could describe none of the ladies' dresses. His audience accordingly gave him up in despair; and the kitchen small-talk flowed back into its ordinary channels, until the clock struck eight, and startled the assembled servants into separating for their morning's work.

A quarter-past eight, and nothing happened. Half-past—and more signs of life appeared from the bedroom regions. The next member of the family who came down stairs was Mr. Andrew Vanstone, the master of the house.

Tall, stout, and upright—with bright blue eyes, and healthy florid complexion—his brown plush shooting-jacket carelessly buttoned awry; his vixenish little Scotch terrier barking unrebuked at his heels; one hand thrust into his waistcoat pocket, and the other smacking the banisters cheerfully as he came down stairs humming a tune—Mr. Vanstone showed his character on the surface of him freely to all men. An easy, hearty, handsome, good-humoured gentleman, who walked on the sunny side of the way of life, and who asked nothing better than to meet all his fellow-passengers in this world on the sunny side, too. Estimating him by years, he had turned fifty. Judging him by lightness of heart, strength of constitution, and capacity for enjoyment, he was no older than most men who have only turned thirty.

'Thomas!' cried Mr. Vanstone, taking up his old felt hat and his thick walking-stick from the hall table. 'Breakfast, this morning, at ten. The young ladies are not likely to be down earlier after the concert last night.—By-the-by, how did you like the concert, yourself, eh? You thought it was Grand? Quite right; so it was. Nothing but Crash-Bang, varied now and then by Bang-Crash; all the women dressed within an inch of their lives; smothering heat, blazing gas, and no room for anybody—yes, yes, Thomas: Grand's the word for it, and Comfortable isn't.' With that expression of opinion, Mr. Vanstone whistled to his vixenish terrier; flourished his stick at the hall door in cheerful defiance of the rain; and set off through wind and weather for his morning walk.

The hands, stealing their steady way round the dial of the clock, pointed to ten minutes to nine. Another member of the family appeared on the stairs—Miss Garth, the governess.

No observant eyes could have surveyed Miss Garth without seeing at once that she was a north-countrywoman. Her hard-featured face; her masculine readiness and decision of movement; her obstinate honesty of look and manner, all proclaimed her border birth and border training. Though little more than forty years of age, her hair was quite grey; and she wore over it the plain cap of an old woman. Neither hair nor head-dress was out of harmony with her face—it looked older than her years: the hard handwriting of trouble had scored it heavily at some past time. The self-possession of her progress down the stairs, and the air of habitual authority with which she looked about her, spoke well for her position in Mr. Vanstone's family. This was evidently not one of the forlorn, persecuted, pitiably dependent order of governesses. Here was a woman who lived on ascertained and honourable terms with her employers—a woman who looked capable of sending any parents in England to the right-about, if they failed to rate her at her proper value.

'Breakfast at ten?' repeated Miss Garth, when the footman had answered the bell, and had mentioned his master's orders. 'Ha! I thought what would come of that concert last night. When people who live in the country

patronize public amusements, public amusements return the compliment by upsetting the family afterwards for days together. *You're* upset, Thomas, I can see—your eyes are as red as a ferret's, and your cravat looks as if you had slept in it. Bring the kettle at a quarter to ten—and if you don't get better in the course of the day, come to me, and I'll give you a dose of physic. That's a well-meaning lad, if you only let him alone,' continued Miss Garth, in soliloquy, when Thomas had retired; 'but he's not strong enough for concerts twenty miles off. They wanted *me* to go with them last night. Yes: catch me!'

Nine o'clock struck; and the minute hand stole on to twenty minutes past the hour, before any more footsteps were heard on the stairs. At the end of that time, two ladies appeared, descending to the breakfast-room together—Mrs. Vanstone and her eldest daughter.

If the personal attractions of Mrs. Vanstone, at an earlier period of life, had depended solely on her native English charms of complexion and freshness, she must have long since lost the last relics of her fairer self. But her beauty, as a young woman, had passed beyond the average national limits; and she still preserved the advantage of her more exceptional personal gifts. Although she was now in her forty-fourth year; although she had been tried, in bygone times, by the premature loss of more than one of her children, and by long attacks of illness which had followed those bereavements of former years—she still preserved the fair proportion and subtle delicacy of feature, once associated with the all-adorning brightness and freshness of beauty, which had left her never to return. Her eldest child, now descending the stairs by her side, was the mirror in which she could look back, and see again the reflection of her own youth. There, folded thick on the daughter's head, lay the massive dark hair, which, on the mother's, was fast turning grey. There, in the daughter's cheek, glowed the lovely dusky red which had faded from the mother's to bloom again no more. Miss Vanstone had already reached the first maturity of womanhood: she had completed her six-and-twentieth year. Inheriting the dark majestic character of her mother's beauty, she had yet hardly inherited all its charms. Though the shape of her face was the same, the features were scarcely so delicate, their proportion was scarcely so true. She was not so tall. She had the dark-brown eyes of her mother—full and soft, with the steady lustre in them which Mrs. Vanstone's eyes had lost—and yet there was less interest, less refinement and depth of feeling in her expression: it was gentle and feminine, but clouded by a certain quiet reserve, from which her mother's face was free. If we dare to look closely enough, may we not observe, that the moral force of character and the higher intellectual capacities in parents seem often to wear out mysteriously in the course of transmission to children? In these days of insidious nervous exhaustion and subtly-spreading nervous malady, is it not possible that the same rule may apply, less rarely than we are willing to admit, to the bodily gifts as well?

The mother and daughter slowly descended the stairs together—the first dressed in dark brown, with an Indian shawl thrown over her shoulders; the second more simply attired in black, with a plain collar and cuffs, and a dark orange-coloured ribbon over the bosom of her dress. As they crossed the hall, and entered the breakfast-room, Miss Vanstone was full of the all-absorbing subject of the last night's concert.

'I am so sorry, mamma, you were not with us,' she said. 'You have been so strong and so well ever since last summer—you have felt so many years younger, as you said yourself—that I am sure the exertion would not have been too much for you.'

'Perhaps not, my love—but it was as well to keep on the safe side.'

'Quite as well,' remarked Miss Garth, appearing at the breakfast-room door. 'Look at Norah (good morning, my dear)—look, I say, at Norah. A perfect wreck; a living proof of your wisdom and mine in staying at home. The vile gas, the foul air, the late hours—what can you expect? She's not made of iron, and she suffers accordingly. No, my dear, you needn't deny it. I see you've got a headache.'

Norah's dark, handsome face brightened into a smile—then lightly clouded again with its accustomed quiet reserve.

'A very litde headache; not half enough to make me regret the concert,' she said, and walked away by herself to the window.

On the far side of a garden and paddock, the view overlooked a stream, some farm-buildings which lay beyond, and the opening of a wooded rocky pass (called, in Somersetshire, a Combe), which here cleft its way through the hills that closed the prospect. A winding strip of road was visible, at no great distance, amid the undulations of the open ground; and along this strip the stalwart figure of Mr. Vanstone was now easily recognizable, returning to the house from his morning walk. He flourished his stick gaily, as he observed his eldest daughter at the window. She nodded and waved her hand in return, very gracefully and prettily—but with something of old-fashioned formality in her manner, which looked strangely in so young a woman, and which seemed out of harmony with a salutation addressed to her father.

The hall-clock struck the adjourned breakfast-hour. When the minute-hand had recorded the lapse of five minutes more, a door banged in the bedroom regions—a clear young voice was heard singing blithely—light rapid footsteps pattered on the upper stairs, descended with a jump to the landing, and pattered again, faster than ever, down the lower flight. In another moment, the youngest of Mr. Vanstone's two daughters (and two only surviving children) dashed into view on the dingy old oaken stairs, with the suddenness of a flash of light; and clearing the last three steps into the hall at a jump, presented herself breathless in the breakfast-room, to make the family circle complete.

By one of those strange caprices of Nature, which science leaves still unexplained, the youngest of Mr. Vanstone's children presented no recognizable resemblance to either of her parents. How had she come by her hair? how had she come by her eyes? Even her father and mother had asked themselves those questions, as she grew up to girlhood, and had been sorely perplexed to answer them. Her hair was of that purely light-brown hue, unmixed with flaxen, or yellow, or red—which is oftener seen on the plumage of a bird than on the head of a human being. It was soft and plentiful, and waved downward from her low forehead in regular folds—but, to some tastes, it was dull and dead, in its absolute want of glossiness, in its monotonous purity of plain light colour. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were just a shade darker than her hair, and seemed made expressly for those violet-blue eyes, which assert their most irresistible charm when associated with a fair complexion. But it was here exactly that the promise of her face failed of performance in the most startling manner. The eyes, which should have been dark, were incomprehensibly and discordantly light: they were of that nearly colourless grey, which, though little attractive in itself, possesses the rare compensating merit of interpreting the finest gradations of thought, the gentlest changes of feeling, the deepest trouble of passion, with a subtle transparency of expression which no darker eyes can rival. Thus quaintly self-contradictory in the upper part of her face, she was hardly less at variance with established ideas of harmony in the lower. Her lips had the true feminine delicacy of form, her cheeks the lovely roundness and smoothness of youth—but the mouth was too large and firm, the chin too square and massive for her sex and age. Her complexion partook of the pure monotony of tint which characterized her hair—it was of the same soft warm creamy fairness all over, without a tinge of colour in the cheeks, except on occasions of unusual bodily exertion, or sudden mental disturbance. The whole countenance—so remarkable in its strongly-opposed characteristics—was rendered additionally striking by its extraordinary mobility. The large, electric, light-grey eyes were hardly ever in repose; all varieties of expression followed each other over the plastic, ever-changing face, with a giddy rapidity which left sober analysis far behind in the race. The girl's exuberant vitality asserted itself all over her, from head to foot. Her figure—taller than her sister's, taller than the average of woman's height; instinct with such a seductive, serpentine suppleness, so lightly and playfully graceful, that its movements suggested, not unnaturally, the movements of a

young cat—her figure was so perfectly developed already that no one who saw her could have supposed that she was only eighteen. She bloomed in the full physical maturity of twenty years or more—bloomed naturally and irresistibly, in right of her matchless health and strength. Here, in truth, lay the mainspring of this strangely-constituted organization. Her headlong course down the house stairs; the brisk activity of all her movements; the incessant sparkle of expression in her face; the enticing gaiety which took the hearts of the quietest people by storm—even the reckless delight in bright colours, which showed itself in her brilliantly-striped morning dress, in her fluttering ribbons, in the large scarlet rosettes on her smart little shoes—all sprang alike from the same source; from the overflowing physical health which strengthened every muscle, braced every nerve, and set the warm young blood tingling through her veins, like the blood of a growing child.

On her entry into the breakfast-room, she was saluted with the customary remonstrance which her flighty disregard of all punctuality habitually provoked from the long-suffering household authorities. In Miss Garth's favourite phrase, 'Magdalen was bom with all the senses—except a sense of order.'

Magdalen!* It was a strange name to have given her? Strange, indeed; and yet, chosen under no extraordinary circumstances. The name had been borne by one of Mr. Vanstone's sisters, who had died in early youth; and, in affectionate remembrance of her, he had called his second daughter by it—just as he had called his eldest daughter Norah, for his wife's sake. Magdalen! Surely, the grand old Bible name—suggestive of a sad and sombre dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion—had been here, as events had turned out, inappropriately bestowed? Surely, this self-contradictory girl had perversely accomplished one contradiction more, by developing into a character which was out of all harmony with her own Christian name!

'Late again!' said Mrs. Vanstone, as Magdalen breathlessly kissed her.

'Late again!' chimed in Miss Garth, when Magdalen came her way next. 'Well?' she went on, taking the girl's chin familiarly in her hand, with a half-satirical, half-fond attention which betrayed that the youngest daughter, with all her faults, was the governess's favourite—'Well? and what has the concert done for *you?* What form of suffering has dissipation inflicted on *your* system, this morning?'

'Suffering!' repeated Magdalen, recovering her breath, and the use of her tongue with it. 'I don't know the meaning of the word: if there's anything the matter with me, I'm too well. Suffering! I'm ready for another concert to-night, and a ball to-morrow, and a play the day after. Oh,' cried Magdalen, dropping into a chair and crossing her hands rapturously on the table, 'how I do like pleasure!'

'Gome! that's explicit at any rate,' said Miss Garth. 'I think Pope must have had you in his mind, when he wrote his famous lines:

> ' "Men some to business, some to pleasure take,
> But every woman is at heart a rake." '*

'The deuce she is!' cried Mr. Vanstone, entering the room while Miss Garth was making her quotation, with the dogs at his heels. 'Well; live and learn. If you're all rakes, Miss Garth, the sexes are turned topsyturvy with a vengeance; and the men will have nothing left for it, but to stop at home and dam the stockings.—Let's have some breakfast.'

'How-d'ye-do, papa?' said Magdalen, taking Mr. Vanstone as boisterously round the neck, as if he belonged to some larger order of Newfoundland dog, and was made to be romped with at his daughter's convenience. 'I'm the rake Miss Garth means; and I want to go to another concert—or a play, if you like—or a ball, if you prefer it—or, anything else in the way of amusement that puts me into a new dress, and plunges me into a crowd of

people, and illuminates me with plenty of light, and sets me in a tingle of excitement all over, from head to foot. Anything will do, as long as it doesn't send us to bed at eleven o'clock.'

Mr. Vanstone sat down composedly under his daughter's flow of language, like a man who was well used to verbal inundation from that quarter. 'If I am to be allowed my choice of amusements next time,' said the worthy gentleman, 'I think a play will suit me better than a concert. The girls enjoyed themselves amazingly, my dear,' he continued, addressing his wife. 'More than I did, I must say. It was altogether above my mark. They played one piece of music which lasted forty minutes. It stopped three times by the way; and we all thought it was done each time, and clapped our hands, rejoiced to be rid of it. But on it went again, to our great surprise and mortification, till we gave it up in despair, and all wished ourselves at Jericho. Norah, my dear! when we had Crash-Bang for forty minutes, with three stoppages by the way, what did they call it?'

'A Symphony, papa,' replied Norah.

'Yes, you darling old Goth, a Symphony by the great Beethoven!' added Magdalen. 'How can you say you were not amused? Have you forgotten the yellow-looking foreign woman, with the unpronounceable name? Don't you remember the faces she made when she sang? and the way she curtseyed and curtseyed, till she cheated the foolish people into crying encore? Look here, mamma—look here, Miss Garth!'

She snatched up an empty plate from the table, to represent a sheet of music, held it before her in the established concert-room position, and produced an imitation of the unfortunate singer's grimaces and curtseyings, so accurately and quaintly true to the original, that her father roared with laughter; and even the footman (who came in at that moment, with the post-bag) rushed out of the room again, and committed the indecorum of echoing his master audibly on the other side of the door.

'Letters, papa. I want the key,' said Magdalen, passing from the imitation at the breakfast-table to the post-bag on the sideboard, with the easy abruptness which characterized all her actions.

Mr. Vanstone searched his pockets and shook his head. Though his youngest daughter might resemble him in nothing else, it was easy to see where Magdalen's unmethodical habits came from.

'I dare say I have left it in the library, along with my other keys,' said Mr. Vanstone. 'Go and look for it, my dear.'

'You really should check Magdalen,' pleaded Mrs. Vanstone, addressing her husband, when her daughter had left the room. 'Those habits of mimicry are growing on her; and she speaks to you with a levity which it is positively shocking to hear.'

'Exactly what I have said myself, till I am tired of repeating it,' remarked Miss Garth. 'She treats Mr. Vanstone as if he was a kind of younger brother of hers.'

'You are kind to us in everything else, papa; and you make kind allowance for Magdalen's high spirits—don't you?' said the quiet Norah, taking her father's part and her sister's, with so little show of resolution on the surface, that few observers would have been sharp enough to detect the genuine substance beneath it.

'Thank you, my dear,' said good-natured Mr. Vanstone. 'Thank you, for a very pretty speech. As for Magdalen,' he continued, addressing his wife and Miss Garth, 'she's an unbroken filly. Let her caper and kick in the paddock to her heart's content. Time enough to break her to harness, when she gets a little older.'

The door opened, and Magdalen returned with the key. She unlocked the post-bag at the sideboard and poured out the letters in a heap. Sorting them gaily in less than a minute, she approached the breakfast-table with both

hands full; and delivered the letters all round with the business-like rapidity of a London postman.

'Two for Norah,' she announced, beginning with her sister. 'Three for Miss Garth. None for mamma. One for me. And the other six all for papa. You lazy old darling, you hate answering letters, don't you?' pursued Magdalen, dropping the postman's character, and assuming the daughter's. 'How you will grumble and fidget in the study! and how you will wish there were no such things as letters in the world! and how red your nice old bald head will get at the top with the worry of writing the answers; and how many of the answers you will leave until to-morrow after till! *The Bristol Theatre's open, papa,'* she whispered, slily and suddenly in her father's ear; 'I saw it in the newspaper when I went to the library to get the key. Let's go to-morrow night!'

While his daughter was chattering, Mr. Vanstone was mechanically sorting his letters. He turned over the first four, in succession, and looked carelessly at the addresses. When he came to the fifth, his attention, which had hitherto wandered towards Magdalen, suddenly became fixed on the post-mark of the letter.

Stooping over him, with her head on his shoulder, Magdalen could see the post-mark as plainly as her father saw it:—New Orleans.

'An American letter, papa!' she said. 'Who do you know at New Orleans?'

Mrs. Vanstone started, and looked eagerly at her husband, the moment Magdalen spoke those words.

Mr. Vanstone said nothing. He quietly removed his daughter's arm from his neck, as if he wished to be free from all interruption. She returned accordingly to her place at the breakfast-table. Her father, with the letter in his hand, waited a little before he opened it; her mother looking at him, the while, with an eager expectant attention, which attracted Miss Garth's notice, and Norah's, as well as Magdalen's.

After a minute or more of hesitation, Mr. Vanstone opened the letter.

His face changed colour the instant he read the first lines; his cheeks fading to a dull, yellow-brown hue, which would have been ashy paleness in a less florid man; and his expression becoming saddened and overclouded in a moment. Norah and Magdalen, watching anxiously, saw nothing but the change that passed over their father. Miss Garth alone observed the effect which that change produced on the attentive mistress of the house.

It was not the effect which she, or any one, could have anticipated. Mrs. Vanstone looked excited rather than alarmed. A faint flush rose on her cheeks—her eyes brightened—she stirred the tea round and round in her cup in a restless impatient manner which was not natural to her.

Magdalen, in her capacity of spoilt child, was, as usual, the first to break the silence.

'What *is* the matter, papa?' she asked.

'Nothing,' said Mr. Vanstone, sharply, without looking up at her.

'I'm sure there must be something,' persisted Magdalen. 'I'm sure there is bad news, papa, in that American letter.'

'There is nothing in the letter that concerns *you*,' said Mr. Vanstone.

It was the first direct rebuff that Magdalen had ever received from her father. She looked at him with an incredulous surprise, which would have been irresistibly absurd under less serious circumstances.

Nothing more was said. For the first time, perhaps, in their lives, the family sat round the breakfast-table in

painful silence. Mr. Vanstone's hearty morning appetite, like his hearty morning spirits, was gone. He absently broke off some morsels of dry toast from the rack near him, absently finished his first cup of tea—then asked for a second, which he left before him untouched.

'Norah,' he said, after an interval, 'you needn't wait for me. Magdalen, my dear, you can go when you like.'

His daughters rose immediately; and Miss Garth considerately followed their example. When an easy-tempered man does assert himself in his family, the rarity of the demonstration invariably has its effect; and the will of that easy-tempered man is Law.

'What can have happened?' whispered Norah, as they closed the breakfast-room door, and crossed the hah.

'What does papa mean by being cross with Me?' exclaimed Magdalen, chafing under a sense of her own injuries.

'May I ask what right you had to pry into your father's private affairs?' retorted Miss Garth.

'Right?' repeated Magdalen. 'I have no secrets from papa—what business has papa to have secrets from me! I consider myself insulted.'

'If you considered yourself properly reproved for not minding your own business,' said the plain-spoken Miss Garth, 'you would be a trifle nearer the truth. Ah! you are like all the rest of the girls in the present day. Not one in a hundred of you knows which end of her's uppermost.'

The three ladies entered the morning-room; and Magdalen acknowledged Miss Garth's reproof by banging the door.

Half an hour passed, and neither Mr. Vanstone nor his wife left the breakfast-room. The servant, ignorant of what had happened, went in to clear the table—found his master and mistress seated close together in deep consultation—and immediately went out again. Another quarter of an hour elapsed before the breakfast-room door was opened, and the private conference of the husband and wife came to an end.

'I hear mamma in the hall,' said Norah. 'Perhaps she is coming to tell us something.'

Mrs. Vanstone entered the morning-room as her daughter spoke. The colour was deeper on her cheeks, and the brightness of half-dried tears glistened in her eyes; her step was more hasty, all her movements were quicker than usual.

'I bring news, my dears, which will surprise you,' she said, addressing her daughters. 'Your father and I are going to London to-morrow.'

Magdalen caught her mother by the arm in speechless astonishment; Miss Garth dropped her work on her lap; even the sedate Norah started to her feet, and amazedly repeated the words, 'Going to London!'

'Without us?' added Magdalen.

'Your father and I are going alone,' stud Mrs. Vanstone. 'Perhaps for as long as three weeks—but not longer. We are going'—she hesitated—'we are going on important family business. Don't hold me, Magdalen. This is a sudden necessity—I have a great deal to do to-day—many things to set in order before to-morrow. There, there, my love, let me go.'

She drew her arm away; hastily kissed her youngest daughter on the forehead; and at once left the room again.

Even Magdalen saw that her mother was not to be coaxed into hearing or answering any more questions.

The morning wore on, and nothing was seen of Mr. Vanstone. With the reckless curiosity of her age and character, Magdalen, in defiance of Miss Garth's prohibition and her sister's remonstrances, determined to go to the study, and look for her father there. When she tried the door, it was locked on the inside. She said, 'It's only me, papa;' and waited for the answer. 'I'm busy now, my dear,' was the answer. 'Don't disturb me.'

Mrs. Vanstone was, in another way, equally inaccessible. She remained in her own room, with the female servants about her, immersed in endless preparations for the approaching departure. The servants, little used in that family to sudden resolutions and unexpected orders, were awkward and confused in obeying directions. They ran from room to room unnecessarily, and lost time and patience in jostling each other on the stairs. If a stranger had entered the house, that day, he might have imagined that an unexpected disaster had happened in it, instead of an unexpected necessity for a journey to London. Nothing proceeded in its ordinary routine. Magdalen, who was accustomed to pass the morning at the piano, wandered restlessly about the staircases and passages, and in and out of doors when there were glimpses of fine weather. Norah, whose fondness for reading had passed into a family proverb, took up book after book from table and shelf, and laid them down again, in despair of fixing her attention. Even Miss Garth felt the all-pervading influence of the household disorganization, and sat alone by the morning-room fire, with her head shaking ominously and her work laid aside.

'Family affairs?' thought Miss Garth, pondering over Mrs. Vanstone's vague explanatory words. 'I have lived twelve years at Combe-Raven; and these are the first family affairs which have got between the parents and the children, in all my experience. What does it mean? Change? I suppose I'm getting old. I don't like change.'

Chapter II

At ten o'clock the next morning, Norah and Magdalen stood alone in the hall at Combe-Raven, watching the departure of the carriage which took their father and mother to the London train.

Up to the last moment, both the sisters had hoped for some explanation of that mysterious 'family business' to which Mrs. Vanstone had so briefly alluded on the previous day. No such explanation had been offered. Even the agitation of the leave-taking, under circumstances entirely new in the home experience of the parents and children, had not shaken the resolute discretion of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone. They had gone—with the warmest testimonies of affection, with farewell embraces fervently reiterated again and again—but without dropping one word, from first to last, of the nature of their errand.

As the grating sound of the carriage-wheels ceased suddenly at a turn in the road, the sisters looked one another in the face; each feeling, and each betraying in her own way, the dreary sense that she was openly excluded, for the first time, from the confidence of her parents. Norah's customary reserve strengthened into sullen silence—she sat down in one of the hall chairs, and looked out frowningly through the open house-door. Magdalen, as usual when her temper was ruffled, expressed her dissatisfaction in the plainest terms. 'I don't care who knows it—I think we are both of us shamefully ill-used!' With those words, the young lady followed her sister's example, by seating herself on a hall chair, and looking aimlessly out through the open house-door.

Almost at the same moment, Miss Garth entered the hall, from the morning-room. Her quick observation showed her the necessity for interfering to some practical purpose; and her ready good sense at once pointed the

way.

‘Look up, both of you, if you please, and listen to me,’ said Miss Garth. ‘If we are all three to be comfortable and happy together, now we are alone, we must stick to our usual habits and go on in our regular way. There is the state of things in plain words. Accept the situation—as the French say. Here am I to set you the example. I have just ordered an excellent dinner at the customary hour. I am going to the medicine-chest, next, to physic the kitchen-maid; an unwholesome girl, whose face-ache is all stomach. In the mean time, Norah, my dear, you will find your work and your books, as usual, in the library. Magdalen, suppose you leave off tying your handkerchief into knots, and use your fingers on the keys of the piano instead? We’ll lunch at one, and take the dogs out afterwards. Be as brisk and cheerful both of you as I am. Gome, rouse up directly. If I see those gloomy faces any longer, as sure as my name’s Garth, I’ll give your mother written warning, and go back to my friends by the mixed train* at twelve forty.’

Concluding her address of expostulation in those terms, Miss Garth led Norah to the library door, pushed Magdalen into the morning-room, and went on her own way sternly to the regions of the medicine-chest.

In this half-jesting, half-earnest manner, she was accustomed to maintain a sort of friendly authority over Mr. Vanstone’s daughters, after her proper functions as governess had necessarily come to an end. Norah, it is needless to say, had long since ceased to be her pupil; and Magdalen had, by this time, completed her education. But Miss Garth had lived too long and too intimately under Mr. Vanstone’s roof to be parted with, for any purely formal considerations; and the first hint at going away which she had thought it her duty to drop, was dismissed with such affectionate warmth of protest, that she never repeated it again, except in jest. The entire management of the household was, from that time forth, left in her hands; and to those duties she was free to add what companionable assistance she could render to Norah’s reading, and what friendly superintendence she could still exercise over Magdalen’s music. Such were the terms on which Miss Garth was now a resident in Mr. Vanstone’s family.

Towards the afternoon the weather improved. At half-past one the sun was shining brightly; and the ladies left the / house, accompanied by the dogs, to set forth on their wajlc

They crossed the stream, and ascended by the little rotky pass to the hills beyond; then diverged to the left, and returned by a cross-road which led through the village of Combe-Raven.

As they came in sight of the first cottages, they passed a man, hanging about the road, who looked attentively, first at Magdalen, then at Norah. They merely observed that he was short, that he was dressed in black, and that he was a total stranger to them—and continued their homeward walk, without thinking more about the loitering foot-passenger whom they had met on their way back.

After they had left the village, and had entered the road which led straight to the house, Magdalen surprised Miss Garth by announcing that the stranger in black had turned, after they had passed him, and was now following them. ‘He keeps on Norah’s side of the road,’ she added, mischievously. ‘I’m not the attraction—don’t blame *me*.’

Whether the man was really following them, or not, made little difference, for they were now close to the house. As they passed through the lodge-gates, Miss Garth looked round, and saw that the stranger was quickening his pace, apparently with the purpose of entering into conversation. Seeing this, she at once directed the young ladies to go on to the house with the dogs, while she herself waited for events at the gate.

There was just time to complete this discreet arrangement, before the stranger reached the lodge. He took off his hat to Miss Garth politely, as she turned round. What did he look like, on the face of him? He looked like a

clergyman in difficulties.

Taking his portrait, from top to toe, the picture of him began with a tall hat, broadly encircled by a mourning band of crumpled crape. Below the hat was a lean, long, sallow face, deeply pitted with the small-pox, and characterized, very remarkably, by eyes of two different colours—one bilious green, one bilious brown, both sharply intelligent. His hair was iron-grey, carefully brushed round at the temples. His cheeks and chin were in the bluest bloom of smooth shaving; his nose was short Roman; his lips long, thin, and supple, curled up at the corners with a mildly-humorous smile. His white cravat was high, stiff, and dingy; the collar, higher, stiffer, and dingier, projected its rigid points on either side beyond his chin. Lower down, the lithe little figure of the man was arrayed throughout in sober-shabby black. His frock-coat was buttoned tight round the waist, and left to bulge open majestically at the chest. His hands were covered with black cotton gloves, neatly darned at the fingers; his umbrella, worn down at the ferule to the last quarter of an inch, was carefully preserved, nevertheless, in an oilskin case. The front view of him was the view in which he looked oldest; meeting him face to face, he might have been estimated at fifty or more. Walking behind him, his back and shoulders were almost young enough to have passed for five-and thirty. His manners were distinguished by a grave serenity. When he opened his lips, he spoke in a rich bass voice, with an easy flow of language, and a strict attention to the elocutionary claims of words in more than one syllable. Persuasion distilled from his mildly-curling lips; and, shabby as he was, perennial flowers of courtesy bloomed all over him from head to foot.

‘This is the residence of Mr. Vanstone, I believe?’ he began, with a circular wave of his hand in the direction of the house. ‘Have I the honour of addressing a member of Mr. Vanstone’s family?’

‘Yes,’ said the plain-spoken Miss Garth. ‘You are addressing Mr. Vanstone’s governess.’

The persuasive man fell back a step—admired Mr. Vanstone’s governess—advanced a step again—and continued the conversation.

‘And the two young ladies,’ he went on, ‘the two young ladies who were walking with you, are doubtless Mr. Vanstone’s daughters? I recognized the darker of the two, and the elder as I apprehend, by her likeness to her handsome mother. The younger lady ’

‘You are acquainted with Mrs. Vanstone, I suppose?’ said Miss Garth, interrupting the stranger’s flow of language, which, all things considered, was beginning, in her opinion, to flow rather freely. The stranger acknowledged the interruption by one of his polite bows, and submerged Miss Garth in his next sentence as if nothing had happened.

‘The younger lady,’ he proceeded, ‘takes after her father, I presume? I assure you, her face struck me. Looking at it with my friendly interest in the family, I thought it very remarkable. I said to myself—Charming, Characteristic, Memorable. Not like her sister, not like her mother. No doubt, the image of her father?’

Once more Miss Garth attempted to stem the man’s flow of words. It was plain that he did not know Mr. Vanstone, even by sight—otherwise, he would never have committed the error of supposing that Magdalen took after her father. Did he know Mrs. Vanstone any better? He had left Miss Garth’s question on that point unanswered. In the name of wonder, who was he? Powers of impudence! what did he want?

‘You may be a friend of the family, though I don’t remember your face,’ said Miss Garth. ‘What may your commands be, if you please? Did you come here to pay Mrs. Vanstone a visit?’

‘I had anticipated the pleasure of communicating with Mrs. Vanstone,’ answered this inveterately evasive and inveterately civil man. ‘How is she?’

‘Much as usual,’ said Miss Garth, feeling her resources of politeness fast failing her.

‘Is she at home?’

‘No.’

‘Out for long?’

‘Gone to London with Mr. Vanstone.’

The man’s long face suddenly grew longer. His bilious brown eye looked disconcerted, and his bilious green eye followed its example. His manner became palpably anxious; and his choice of words was more carefully selected than ever.

‘Is Mrs. Vanstone’s absence likely to extend over any very lengthened period?’ he inquired.

‘It will extend over three weeks,’ replied Miss Garth. ‘I think you have now asked me questions enough,’ she went on, beginning to let her temper get the better of her at last. ‘Be so good, if you please, as to mention your business and your name. If you have any message to leave for Mrs. Vanstone, I shall be writing to her by to-night’s post, and I can take charge of it.’

‘A thousand thanks! A most valuable suggestion. Permit me to take advantage of it immediately.’

He was not in the least affected by the severity of Miss Garth’s looks and language—he was simply relieved by her proposal, and he showed it with the most engaging sincerity. This time, his bilious green eye took the initiative, and set his bilious brown eye the example of recovered serenity. His curling lips took a new twist upwards; he tucked his umbrella briskly under his arm; and produced from the breast of his coat a large old-fashioned black pocket-book. From this he took a pencil and a card—hesitated and considered for a moment—wrote rapidly on the card—and placed it, with the politest alacrity, in Miss Garth’s hand.

‘I shall feel personally obliged, if you will honour me by enclosing that card in your letter,’ he said. ‘There is no necessity for my troubling you additionally with a message. My name will be quite sufficient to recall a little family matter to Mrs. Vanstone, which has no doubt escaped her memory. Accept my best thanks. This has been a day of agreeable surprises to me. I have found the country hereabouts remarkably pretty; I have seen Mrs. Vanstone’s two charming daughters; I have become acquainted with an honoured preceptress in Mr. Vanstone’s family. I congratulate myself—I apologize for occupying your valuable time—I beg my renewed acknowledgements—I wish you good morning.’

He raised his tall hat. His brown eye twinkled, his green eye twinkled, his curly lips smiled sweetly. In a moment, he turned on his heel. His youthful back appeared to the best advantage; his active little legs took him away trippingly in the direction of the village. One, two, three—and he reached the turn in the road. Four, five, six—and he was gone.

Miss Garth looked down at the card in her hand, and looked up again in blank astonishment. The name and address of the clerical-looking stranger (both written in pencil) ran as follows:—

Captain Wragge. Post-office, Bristol.

Chapter III

When she returned to the house, Miss Garth made no attempt to conceal her unfavourable opinion of the stranger in black. His object was, no doubt, to obtain pecuniary assistance from Mrs. Vanstone. What the nature of his claim on her might be, seemed less intelligible—unless it was the claim of a poor relation. Had Mrs. Vanstone ever mentioned, in die presence of her daughters, the name of Captain Wragge? Neither of them recollected to have heard it before. Had Mrs. Vanstone ever referred to any poor relations who were dependent on her? On the contrary, she had mentioned of late years that she doubted having any relations at all who were still living. And yet, Captain Wragge had plainly declared that the name on his card would recall 'a family matter' to Mrs. Vanstone's memory. What did it mean? A false statement, on the stranger's part, without any intelligible reason for making it? Or a second mystery, following close on the heels of the mysterious journey to London?

All the probabilities seemed to point to some hidden connection between the 'family affairs' which had taken Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone so suddenly from home, and the 'family matter' associated with the name of Captain Wragge. Miss Garth's doubts thronged back irresistibly on her mind, as she sealed her letter to Mrs. Vanstone, with the captain's card added by way of enclosure.

By return of post the answer arrived.

Always the earliest riser among the ladies of the house, Miss Garth was alone in the breakfast-room when the letter was brought in. Her first glance at its contents convinced her of the necessity of reading it carefully through in retirement, before any embarrassing questions could be put to her. Leaving a message with the servant requesting Norah to make the tea that morning, she went upstairs at once to the solitude and security of her own room.

Mrs. Vanstone's letter extended to some length. The first part of it referred to Captain Wragge, and entered unreservedly into all necessary explanations relating to the man himself and to the motive which had brought him to Combe-Raven.

It appeared from Mrs. Vanstone's statement that her mother had been twice married. Her mother's first husband had been a certain Doctor Wragge—a widower with young children; and one of those children was now the unmilitary-looking captain, whose address was 'Post-office, Bristol.' Mrs. Wragge had left no family by her first husband; and had afterwards married Mrs. Vanstone's father. Of that second marriage Mrs. Vanstone herself was the only issue. She had lost both her parents while she was still a young woman; and, in course of years, her mother's family connections (who were then her nearest surviving relatives) had been one after another removed by death. She was left, at the present writing, without a relation in the world—excepting perhaps certain cousins whom she had never seen, and of whose existence even, at the present moment, she possessed no positive knowledge.

Under these circumstances, what family claim had Captain Wragge on Mrs. Vanstone?

None whatever. As the son of her mother's first husband, by that husband's first wife, not even the widest stretch of courtesy could have included him at any time in the list of Mrs. Vanstone's most distant relations. Well knowing this (the letter proceeded to say), he had nevertheless persisted in forcing himself upon her as a species of family connection; and she had weakly sanctioned the intrusion, solely from the dread that he would otherwise introduce himself to Mr. Vanstone's notice, and take unblushing advantage of Mr. Vanstone's generosity. Shrinking, naturally, from allowing her husband to be annoyed, and probably cheated as well, by any person, who claimed, however preposterously, a family connection with herself, it had been her practice, for many years past, to assist the captain from her own purse, on the condition that he should never come near the house, and that he should not presume to make any application whatever to Mr. Vanstone.

Readily admitting the imprudence of this course, Mrs. Vanstone further explained that she had perhaps been the more inclined to adopt it, through having been always accustomed, in her early days, to see the captain living now upon one member, and now upon another, of her mother's family. Possessed of abilities which might have raised him to distinction, in almost any career that he could have chosen, he had nevertheless, from his youth upwards, been a disgrace to all his relatives. He had been expelled the militia regiment in which he once held a commission. He had tried one employment after another, and had discreditably failed in all. He had lived on his wits, in the lowest and basest meaning of the phrase. He had married a poor ignorant woman, who had served as a waitress at some low eating-house, who had unexpectedly come into a little money, and whose small inheritance he had mercilessly squandered to the last farthing. In plain terms, he was an incorrigible scoundrel; and he had now added one more to the list of his many misdemeanours, by impudently breaking the conditions on which Mrs. Vanstone had hitherto assisted him. She had written at once to the address indicated on his card, in such terms and to such purpose as would prevent him, she hoped and believed, from ever venturing near the house again. Such were the terms in which Mrs. Vanstone concluded that first part of her letter which referred exclusively to Captain Wragge.

Although the statement thus presented implied a weakness in Mrs. Vanstone's character which Miss Garth, after many years of intimate experience, had never detected, she accepted the explanation as a matter of course; receiving it all the more readily, inasmuch as it might, without impropriety, be communicated in substance to appease the irritated curiosity of the two young ladies. For this reason especially, she perused the first half of the letter with an agreeable sense of relief. Far different was the impression produced on her, when she advanced to the second half, and when she had read it to the end.

The second part of the letter was devoted to the subject of the journey to London.

Mrs. Vanstone began by referring to the long and intimate friendship which had existed between Miss Garth and herself. She now felt it due to that friendship to explain confidentially the motive which had induced her to leave home with her husband. Miss Garth had delicately refrained from showing it, but she must naturally have felt, and must still be feeling, great surprise at the mystery in which their departure had been involved; and she must doubtless have asked herself why Mrs. Vanstone should have been associated with family affairs which (in her independent position as to relatives) must necessarily concern Mr. Vanstone alone.

Without touching on those affairs, which it was neither desirable nor necessary to do, Mrs. Vanstone then proceeded to say that she would at once set all Miss Garth's doubts at rest, so far as they related to herself, by one plain acknowledgement. Her object in accompanying her husband to London was to see a certain celebrated physician, and to consult him privately on a very delicate and anxious matter connected with the state of her health. In plainer terms still, this anxious matter meant nothing less than the possibility that she might again become a mother.

When the doubt had first suggested itself, she had treated it as a mere delusion. The long interval that had elapsed since the birth of her last child; the serious illness which had afflicted her after the death of that child in infancy; the time of life at which she had now arrived—all inclined her to dismiss the idea as soon as it arose in her mind. It had returned again and again in spite of her. She had felt the necessity of consulting the highest medical authority; and had shrunk, at the same time, from alarming her daughters, by summoning a London physician to the house. The medical opinion, sought under the circumstances already mentioned, had now been obtained. Her doubt was confirmed as a certainty; and the result, which might be expected to take place towards the end of the summer, was, at her age and with her constitutional peculiarities, a subject for serious future anxiety, to say the least of it. The physician had done his best to encourage her; but she had understood the drift of his questions more clearly than he supposed, and she knew that he looked to the future with more than

ordinary doubt.

Having disclosed these particulars, Mrs. Vanstone requested that they might be kept a secret between her correspondent and herself. She had felt unwilling to mention her suspicions to Miss Garth, until those suspicions had been confirmed—and she now recoiled, with even greater reluctance, from allowing her daughters to be in any way alarmed about her. It would be best to dismiss the subject for the present, and to wait hopefully till the summer came. In the mean time they would all, she trusted, be happily reunited on the twenty-third of the month, which Mr. Vanstone had fixed on as the day for their return. With this intimation, and with the customary messages, the letter, abruptly and confusedly, came to an end.

For the first few minutes, a natural sympathy for Mrs. Vanstone was the only feeling of which Miss Garth was conscious after she had laid the letter down. Ere long, however, there rose obscurely on her mind a doubt which perplexed and distressed her. Was the explanation which she had just read, really as satisfactory and as complete as it professed to be? Testing it plainly by facts, surely not.

On the morning of her departure, Mrs. Vanstone had unquestionably left the house in good spirits. At her age, and in her state of health, were good spirits compatible with such an errand to a physician as the errand on which she was bent? Then, again, had that letter from New Orleans, which had necessitated Mr. Vanstone's departure, no share in occasioning his wife's departure as well? Why, otherwise, had she looked up so eagerly the moment her daughter mentioned the post-mark. Granting the avowed motive for her journey—did not her manner, on the morning when the letter was opened, and again on the morning of departure, suggest the existence of some other motive which her letter kept concealed?

If it was so, the conclusion that followed was a very distressing one. Mrs. Vanstone, feeling what was due to her long friendship with Miss Garth, had apparently placed the fullest confidence in her, on one subject, by way of unsuspiciously maintaining the strictest reserve towards her on another. Naturally frank and straightforward in all her own dealings, Miss Garth shrank from plainly pursuing her doubts to this result: a want of loyalty towards her tried and valued friend seemed implied in the mere dawning of it on her mind.

She locked up the letter in her desk; roused herself resolutely to attend to the passing interests of the day; and went down stairs again to the breakfast-room. Amid many uncertainties, this at least was clear: Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone were coming back on the twenty-third of the month. Who could say what new revelations might not come back with them?

Chapter IV

No new revelations came back with them: no anticipations associated with their return were realized. On the one forbidden subject of their errand in London, there was no moving either the master or the mistress of the house. Whatever their object might have been, they had to all appearance successfully accomplished it—for they both returned in perfect possession of their every-day looks and manners. Mrs. Vanstone's spirits had subsided to their natural quiet level; Mr. Vanstone's imperturbable cheerfulness sat as easily and indolently on him as usual. This was the one noticeable result of their journey—this, and no more. Had the household revolution run its course already? Was the secret, thus far hidden impenetrably, hidden for ever?

Nothing in this world is hidden for ever. The gold which has lain for centuries unsuspected in the ground, reveals itself one day on the surface. Sand turns traitor, and betrays the footstep that has passed over it; water

gives back to the tell-tale surface the body that has been drowned. Fire itself leaves the confession, in ashes, of the substance consumed in it. Hate breaks its prison-secrecy in the thoughts, through the doorway of the eyes; and Love finds the Judas who betrays it by a kiss. Look where we will, the inevitable law of revelation is one of the laws of nature: the lasting preservation of a secret is a miracle which the world has never yet seen.

How was the secret now hidden in the household at Combe-Raven doomed to disclose itself? Through what coming event in the daily lives of the father, the mother, and the daughters, was the law of revelation destined to break the fatal way to discovery? The way opened (unseen by the parents, and unsuspected by the children) through the first event that happened after Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone's return—an event which presented, on the surface of it, no interest of greater importance than the trivial social ceremony of a morning call.

Three days after the master and mistress of Combe-Raven had come back, the female members of the family happened to be assembled together in the morning-room. The view from the windows looked over the flower-garden and shrubbery; this last being protected at its outward extremity by a fence, and approached from the lane beyond by a wicket-gate. During an interval in the conversation, the attention of the ladies was suddenly attracted to this gate, by the sharp sound of the iron latch falling in its socket. Some one had entered the shrubbery from the lane; and Magdalen at once placed herself at the window to catch the first sight of the visitor through the trees.

After a few minutes, the figure of a gentleman became visible, at the point where the shrubbery path joined the winding garden-walk which led to the house. Magdalen looked at him attentively, without appearing, at first, to know who he was. As he came nearer, however, she started in astonishment; and turning quickly to her mother and sister, proclaimed the gentleman in the garden to be no other than 'Mr. Francis Clare.'

The visitor thus announced, was the son of Mr. Vanstone's oldest associate and nearest neighbour.

Mr. Clare the elder inhabited an unpretending little cottage, situated just outside the shrubbery-fence which marked the limit of the Combe-Raven grounds. Belonging to the younger branch of a family of great antiquity, the one inheritance of importance that he had derived from his ancestors, was the possession of a magnificent library, which not only filled all the rooms in his modest little dwelling, but lined the staircases and passages as well. Mr. Clare's books represented the one important interest of Mr. Clare's life. He had been a widower for many years past, and made no secret of his philosophical resignation to the loss of his wife. As a father, he regarded his family of three sons in the light of a necessary domestic evil, which perpetually threatened the sanctity of his study and the safety of his books. When the boys went to school, Mr. Clare said 'good-bye' to them—and 'thank God' to himself. As for his small income, and his still smaller domestic establishment, he looked at them both from the same satirically indifferent point of view. He called himself a pauper with a pedigree. He abandoned the entire direction of his household to the slatternly old woman who was his only servant, on the condition that she was never to venture near his books, with a duster in her hand, from one year's end to the other. His favourite poets were Horace and Pope; his chosen philosophers, Hobbes and Voltaire. He took his exercise and his fresh air under protest; and always walked the same distance to a yard, on the ugliest high-road in the neighbourhood. He was crooked of back, and quick of temper. He could digest radishes, and sleep after green tea. His views of human nature were the views of Diogenes, tempered by Rochefoucault;* his personal habits were slovenly in the last degree; and his favourite boast was that he had outlived all human prejudices.

Such was this singular man, in his more superficial aspects. What nobler qualities he might possess below the surface, no one had ever discovered. Mr. Vanstone, it is true, stoutly asserted that 'Mr. Clare's worst side was his outside'—but, in this expression of opinion, he stood alone among his neighbours. The association between these two widely-dissimilar men had lasted for many years, and was almost close enough to be called a

friendship. They had acquired a habit of meeting to smoke together on certain evenings in the week, in the cynic-philosopher's study, and of there disputing on every imaginable subject—Mr. Vanstone flourishing the stout cudgels of assertion, and Mr. Clare meeting him with the keen-edged tools of sophistry. They generally quarrelled at night, and met on the neutral ground of the shrubbery to be reconciled together the next morning. The bond of intercourse thus curiously established between them, was strengthened on Mr. Vanstone's side by a hearty interest in his neighbour's three sons—an interest by which those sons benefited all the more importantly, seeing that one of the prejudices which their father had oudived, was a prejudice in favour of his own children.

'I look at those boys,' the philosopher was accustomed to say, 'with a perfectly impartial eye; I dismiss the unimportant accident of their birth from all consideration; and I find them below the average in every respect. The only excuse which a poor gendeman has for presuming to exist in the nineteenth century, is the excuse of extraordinary ability. My boys have been addle-headed from infancy. If I had any capital to give them, I should make Frank a butcher, Cecil a baker, and Arthur a grocer—those being the only human vocations I know of which are certain to be always in request. As it is, I have no money to help them with; and they have no brains to help themselves. They appear to me to be three human superfluities in dirty jackets and noisy boots; and, unless they clear themselves off the community by running away, I don't myself profess to see what is to be done with them.'

Fortunately for the boys, Mr. Vanstone's views were still fast imprisoned in the ordinary prejudices. At his intercession, and through his influence, Frank, Cecil, and Arthur were received on the foundation of a well-reputed grammar-school.* In holiday time they were mercifully allowed the run of Mr. Vanstone's paddock; and were humanized and refined by association, indoors, with Mrs. Vanstone and her daughters. On these occasions, Mr. Clare used sometimes to walk across from his cottage (in his dressing-gown and slippers), and look at the boys disparagingly, through the window or over the fence, as if they were three wild animals whom his neighbour was attempting to tame. 'You and your wife are excellent people,' he used to say to Mr. Vanstone. 'I respect your honest prejudices in favour of those boys of mine with all my heart. But you are *so* wrong about them—you are indeed! I wish to give no offence; I speak quite impartially—but mark my words, Vanstone: they'll all three turn out ill, in spite of everything you can do to prevent it.'

In later years, when Frank had reached the age of seventeen, the same curious shifting of the relative positions of parent and friend between the two neighbours, was exemplified more absurdly than ever. A civil engineer in the north of England, who owed certain obligations to Mr. Vanstone, expressed his willingness to take Frank under superintendence, on terms of the most favourable kind. When this proposal was received, Mr. Clare, as usual, first shifted his own character as Frank's father on Mr. Vanstone's shoulders—and then moderated his neighbour's parental enthusiasm from the point of view of an impartial spectator.

'It's the finest chance for Frank that could possibly have happened,' cried Mr. Vanstone, in a glow of fatherly enthusiasm.

'My good fellow, he won't take it,' retorted Mr. Clare, with the icy composure of a disinterested friend.

'But he *shall* take it,' persisted Mr. Vanstone.

'Say he shall have a mathematical head,' rejoined Mr. Clare; 'say he shall possess industry, ambition, and firmness of purpose. Pooh! pooh! you don't look at him with my impartial eyes. I say, No mathematics, no industry, no ambition, no firmness of purpose. Frank is a compound of negatives—and there they are.'

'Hang your negatives!' shouted Mr. Vanstone. 'I don't care a rush for negatives, or affirmatives either. Frank shall have this splendid chance; and I'll lay you any wager you like he makes the best of it.'

‘I am not rich enough to lay wagers usually,’ replied Mr. Clare; ‘but I think I have got a guinea about the house somewhere; and I’ll lay you that guinea Frank comes back on our hands like a bad shilling.’

‘Done!’ said Mr. Vanstone. ‘No: stop a minute! I won’t do the lad’s character the injustice of backing it at even money. I’ll lay you five to one Frank turns up trumps in this business! You ought to be ashamed of yourself for talking of him as you do. What sort of hocus-pocus you bring it about by, I don’t pretend to know; but you always end in making me take his part, as if I was his father instead of you. Ah, yes! give you time, and you’ll defend yourself. I won’t give you time; I won’t have any of your specialpleading. Black’s white according to you. I don’t care: it’s black for all that. You may talk nineteen to the dozen—I shall write to my friend and say Yes, in Frank’s interests, by to-day’s post.’

Such were the circumstances under which Mr. Francis Clare departed for the north of England, at the age of seventeen, to start in life as a civil engineer.

From time to time, Mr. Vanstone’s friend communicated with him on the subject of the new pupil. Frank was praised, as a quiet, gentleman-like, interesting lad—but he was also reported to be rather slow at acquiring the rudiments of engineering science. Other letters, later in date, described him as a little too ready to despond about himself; as having been sent away, on that account, to some new railway works, to see if change of scene would rouse him; and as having benefited in every respect by the experiment—except perhaps in regard to his professional studies, which still advanced but slowly. Subsequent communications announced his departure, under care of a trustworthy foreman, for some public works in Belgium; touched on the general benefit he appeared to derive from this new change; praised his excellent manners and address, which were of great assistance in facilitating business communications with the foreigners—and passed over in ominous silence the main question of his actual progress in the acquirement of knowledge. These reports, and many others which resembled them, were all conscientiously presented by Frank’s friend to the attention of Frank’s father. On each occasion, Mr. Clare exulted over Mr. Vanstone; and Mr. Vanstone quarrelled with Mr. Clare. ‘One of these days, you’ll wish you hadn’t laid that wager,’ said the cynic philosopher. ‘One of these days, I shall have the blessed satisfaction of pocketing your guinea,’ cried the sanguine friend. Two years had then passed since Frank’s departure. In one year more, results asserted themselves, and settled the question.

Two days after Mr. Vanstone’s return from London, he was called away from the breakfast-table before he had found time enough to look over his letters, delivered by the morning’s post. Thrusting them into one of the pockets of his shooting-jacket, he took the letters out again, at one grasp, to read them when occasion served, later in the day. The grasp included the whole correspondence, with one exception—that exception being a final report from the civil engineer, which notified the termination of the connection between his pupil and himself, and the immediate return of Frank to his father’s house.

While this important announcement lay unsuspected in Mr. Vanstone’s pocket, the object of it was travelling home, as fast as railways could take him. At half-past ten at night, while Mr. Clare was sitting in studious solitude over his books and his green tea, with his favourite black cat to keep him company, he heard footsteps in the passage—the door opened—and Frank stood before him.

Ordinary men would have been astonished. But the philosopher’s composure was not to be shaken by any such trifle as the unexpected return of his eldest son. He could not have looked up more calmly from his learned volume, if Frank had been absent for three minutes instead of three years.

‘Exactly what I predicted,’ said Mr. Clare. ‘Don’t interrupt me by making explanations; and don’t frighten the cat. If there is anything to eat in the kitchen, get it and go to bed. You can walk over to Combe-Raven to-morrow, and give this message from me to Mr. Vanstone:—“Father’s compliments, sir, and I have come back

upon your hands like a bad shilling, as he always said I should. He keeps his own guinea, and takes your five; and he hopes you'll mind what he says to you another time." That is the message. Shut the door after you. Good-night.'

Under these unfavourable auspices, Mr. Francis Clare made his appearance the next morning in the grounds at Combe-Raven; and, something doubtful of the reception that might await him, slowly approached the precincts of the house.

It was not wonderful that Magdalen should have failed to recognize him when he first appeared in view. He had gone away a backward lad of seventeen; he returned a young man of twenty. His slim figure had now acquired strength and grace, and had increased in stature to the medium height. The small regular features, which he was supposed to have inherited from his mother, were rounded and filled out, without having lost their remarkable delicacy of form. His beard was still in its infancy; and nascent lines of whisker traced their modest way sparely down his cheeks. His gentle wandering brown eyes would have looked to better advantage in a woman's face—they wanted spirit and firmness to fit them for the face of a man. His hands had the same wandering habit as his eyes; they were constantly changing from one position to another, constantly twisting and turning any little stray thing they could pick up. He was undeniably handsome, graceful, well bred—but no close observer could look at him, without suspecting that the stout old family stock had begun to wear out in the later generations, and that Mr. Francis Clare had more in him of the shadow of his ancestors than of the substance.

When the astonishment caused by his appearance had partially subsided, a search was instituted for the missing report. It was found in the remotest recesses of Mr. Vanstone's capacious pocket, and was read by that gentleman on the spot.

The plain facts, as stated by the engineer, were briefly these. Frank was not possessed of the necessary abilities to fit him for his new calling; and it was useless to waste time, by keeping him any longer in an employment for which he had no vocation. This, after three years' trial, being the conviction on both sides, the master had thought it the most straightforward course for the pupil to go home, and candidly place results before his father and his friends. In some other pursuit, for which he was more fit and in which he could feel an interest, he would no doubt display the industry and perseverance which he had been too much discouraged to practise in the profession that he had now abandoned. Personally, he was liked by all who knew him; and his future prosperity was heartily desired by the many friends whom he had made in the north. Such was the substance of the report, and so it came to an end.

Many men would have thought the engineer's statement rather too carefully worded; and, suspecting him of trying to make the best of a bad case, would have entertained serious doubts on the subject of Frank's future. Mr. Vanstone was too easy-tempered and sanguine—and too anxious as well, not to yield his old antagonist an inch more ground than he could help—to look at the letter from any such unfavourable point of view. Was it Frank's fault if he had not got the stuff in him that engineers were made of? Did no other young men over begin life with a false start? Plenty began in that way, and got over it, and did wonders afterwards. With these commentaries on the letter, the kind-hearted gentleman patted Frank on the shoulder. 'Cheer up, my lad!' said Mr. Vanstone. 'We will be even with your father one of these days, though he *has* won the wager this time!'

The example thus set by the master of the house, was / followed at once by the family—with the solitary *exception* of Norah, whose incurable formality and reserve expressed themselves, not too graciously, in her distant manner towards the visitor. The rest, led by Magdalen (who had been Frank's favourite playfellow in past times) glided back into their old easy habits with him, without an effort. He was 'Frank' with all of them but Norah, who persisted in addressing him as 'Mr. Clare.' Even the account he was now encouraged to give of the reception accorded to him by his father, on the previous night, failed to disturb Norah's gravity. She sat with

her dark handsome face steadily averted, her eyes cast down, and the rich colour in her cheeks warmer and deeper than usual. All the rest, Miss Garth included, found old Mr. Clare's speech of welcome to his son, quite irresistible. The noise and merriment were at their height, when the servant came in, and struck the whole party dumb by the announcement of visitors in the drawing-room. 'Mr. Marrable, Mrs. Marrable, and Miss Marrable; Evergreen Lodge, Clifton.'

Norah rose as readily as if the new arrivals had been a relief to her mind. Mrs. Vanstone was the next to leave her chair. These two went away first, to receive the visitors. Magdalen, who preferred the society of her father and Frank, pleaded hard to be left behind; but Miss Garth, after granting five minutes' grace, took her into custody, and marched her out of the room. Frank rose to take his leave.

'No, no,' said Mr. Vanstone, detaining him. 'Don't go. These people won't stop long. Mr. Marrable's a merchant at Bristol. I've met him once or twice, when the girls forced me to take them to parties at Clifton. Mere acquaintances, nothing more. Come and smoke a cigar in the greenhouse. Hang all visitors—they worry one's life out. I'll appear at the last moment with an apology; and you shall follow me at a safe distance, and be a proof that I was really engaged.'

Proposing this ingenious stratagem, in a confidential whisper, Mr. Vanstone took Frank's arm, and led him round the house by the back way. The first ten minutes of seclusion in the conservatory, passed without events of any kind. At the end of that time, a flying figure in bright garments, flashed upon the two gendemen through the glass—the door was flung open—flower-pots fell in homage to passing petticoats—and Mr. Vanstone's youngest daughter ran up to him at headlong speed, with every external appearance of having suddenly taken leave of her senses.

'Papa! the dream of my whole life is realized,' she said, as soon as she could speak. 'I shall fly through the roof of the greenhouse, if somebody doesn't hold me down. The Marrables have come here with an invitation. Guess, you darling—guess what they're going to give at Evergreen Lodge!'

'A ball,' said Mr. Vanstone, without a moment's hesitation.

'Private Theatricals!!!' cried Magdalen, her clear young voice ringing through the conservatory like a bell; her loose sleeves falling back, and showing her round white arms to the dimpled elbows, as she clapped her hands ecstatically in the air. 'The Rivals, is the play, papa—the Rivals by the famous what's-his name*—and they want ME to act! The one thing in the whole universe that I long to do most. It all depends on you. Mamma shakes her head; and Miss Garth looks daggers; and Norah's as sulky as usual—but if you say Yes, they must all three give way, and let me do as I like. Say yes,' she pleaded, nesding softly up to her father, and pressing her lips with a fond gentleness to his ear, as she whispered the next words. 'Say Yes—and I'll be a good girl for the rest of my life.'

'A good girl?' repeated Mr. Vanstone—'A mad girl, I think you must mean. Hang these people, and their theatricals! I shall have to go indoors, and see about this matter. You needn't throw away your cigar, Frank. You're well out of the business, and you can stop here.'

'No, he can't,' said Magdalen. 'He's in the business, too.'

Mr. Francis Clare had hitherto remained modestly in the background. He now came forward, with a face expressive of speechless amazement.

'Yes,' continued Magdalen, answering his blank look of inquiry with perfect composure. 'You are to act. Miss Marrable and I have a turn for business, and we settled it all in five minutes. There are two parts in the play left

to be filled. One is Lucy, the waiting-maid; which is the character I have undertaken—with papa's permission,' she added, slily pinching her father's arm; 'and he won't say No, will he? First, because he's a darling; secondly, because I love him, and he loves me; thirdly, because there is never any difference of opinion between us (is there?); fourthly, because I give him a kiss, which naturally stops his mouth and settles the whole question. Dear me, I'm wandering. Where was I just now? Oh, yes! explaining myself to Frank '

'I beg your pardon,' began Frank, attempting, at this point, to enter his protest.

'The second character in the play,' pursued Magdalen, without taking the smallest notice of the protest, 'is Falkland—a jealous lover, with a fine flow of language. Miss Marrable and I discussed Falkland privately on the window-seat while the rest were talking. She is a delightful girl—so impulsive, so sensible, so entirely unaffected. She confided in me. She said, 'One of our miseries is that we can't find a gentleman who will grapple with the hideous difficuldes of Falkland.' Of course I soothed her. Of course I said, 'I've got the gentleman, and he shall grapple immediately.'—'Oh heavens! who is he?'—'Mr. Francis Clare.'—'And where is he?'—'In the house at this moment.'—'Will you be so very charming, Miss Vanstone, as to fetch him?'—'I'll fetch him, Miss Marrable, with the greatest pleasure.' I left the window-seat—I rushed into the morning-room—I smelt cigars—I followed the smell—and here I am.'

'It's a compliment, I know, to be asked to act,' said Frank, in great embarrassment. 'But I hope you and Miss Marrable will excuse me———'

'Certainly not. Miss Marrable and I are both remarkable for the firmness of our characters. When we say Mr. So-and-So is positively to act the part of Falkland, we positively mean it. Come in, and be introduced.'

'But I never tried to act. I don't know how.'

'Not of the slightest consequence. If you don't know how, come to me, and I'll teach you.'

'You!' exclaimed Mr. Vanstone. 'What do you know about it?'

'Pray, papa, be serious! I have the strongest internal conviction that I could act every character in the play—Falkland included. Don't let me have to speak a second time, Frank. Come and be introduced.'

She took her father's arm, and moved on with him to the door of the greenhouse. At the steps, she turned and looked round to see if Frank was following her. It was only the action of a moment; but in that moment her natural firmness of will rallied all its resources—strengthened itself with the influence of her beauty—commanded—and conquered. She looked lovely: the flush was tenderly bright in her cheeks; the radiant pleasure shone and sparkled in her eyes; the position of her figure, turned suddenly from the waist upwards, disclosed its delicate strength, its supple firmness, its seductive serpentine grace. 'Come!' she said, with a coquettish beckoning action of her head. 'Come, Frank!'

Few men of forty would have resisted her, at that moment. Frank was twenty last birthday. In other words, he threw aside his cigar, and followed her out of the greenhouse.

As he turned, and closed the door—in the instant when he lost sight of her—his disinclination to be associated with the private theatricals revived. At the foot of the house-steps he stopped again; plucked a twig from a plant near him; broke it in his hand; and looked about him uneasily, on this side, and on that. The path to the left led back to his father's cottage—the way of escape lay open. Why not take it?

While he still hesitated, Mr. Vanstone and his daughter reached the top of the steps. Once more, Magdalen looked round; looked with her resistless beauty, with her all-conquering smile. She beckoned again; and again

he followed her—up the steps, and over the threshold. The door closed on them.

So, with a trifling gesture of invitation on one side, with a trifling act of compliance on the other: so—with no knowledge in his mind, with no thought in hers, of the secret still hidden under the journey to London—they took the way which led to that secret's discovery, through many a darker winding that was yet to come.

Chapter V

Mr. Vanstone's inquiries into the proposed theatrical entertainment at Evergreen Lodge were answered by a narrative of dramatic disasters; of which Miss Marrable impersonated the innocent cause, and in which her father and mother played the parts of chief victims.

Miss Marrable was that hardest of all bom tyrants—an only child. She had never granted a constitutional privilege to her oppressed father and mother, since the time when she cut her first tooth. Her seventeenth birthday was now near at hand; she had decided on celebrating it by acting a play; had issued her orders accordingly; and had been obeyed by her docile parents as implicitly as usual. Mrs. Marrable gave up the drawing-room to be laid waste for a stage and a theatre. Mr. Marrable secured the services of a respectable professional person to drill the young ladies and gentlemen, and to accept all the other responsibilities, incidental to creating a dramatic world out of a domestic chaos. Having further accustomed themselves to the breaking of furniture and the staining of walls—to thumping, tumbling, hammering, and screaming; to doors always banging, and to footsteps perpetually running up and down stairs—the nominal master and mistress of the house fondly believed that their chief troubles were over. Innocent and fatal delusion! It is one thing in private society to set up the stage and choose the play—it is another thing altogether to find the actors. Hitherto, only the small preliminary annoyances proper to the occasion had shown themselves at Evergreen Lodge. The sound and serious troubles were all to come.

'The Rivals' having been chosen as the play, Miss Marrable, as a matter of course, appropriated to herself the part of 'Lydia Languish.' One of her favoured swains next secured 'Captain Absolute,' and another laid violent hands on 'Sir Lucius O'Trigger.' These two were followed by an accommodating spinster-relative, who accepted the heavy dramatic responsibility of 'Mrs. Malaprop'—and there the theatrical proceedings came to a pause. Nine more speaking characters were left to be fitted with representatives; and with that unavoidable necessity the serious troubles began.

All the friends of the family suddenly became unreliable people, for the first time in their lives. After encouraging the idea of the play, they declined the personal sacrifice of acting in it—or, they accepted characters, and then broke down in the effort to study them—or they volunteered to take the parts which they knew were already engaged, and declined the parts which were waiting to be acted—or they were afflicted with weak constitutions, and mischievously fell ill when they were wanted at rehearsal—or they had Puritan relatives in the background, and, after slipping into their parts cheerfully at the week's beginning, oozed out of them penitendy, under serious family pressure, at the week's end. Meanwhile, the carpenters hammered and the scenes rose. Miss Marrable, whose temperament was sensitive, became hysterical under the strain of perpetual anxiety; the family doctor declined to answer for the nervous consequences if something was not done. Renewed efforts were made in every direction. Actors and actresses were sought with a desperate disregard of all considerations of personal fitness. Necessity, which knows no law, either in the drama or out of it, accepted a lad of eighteen as the representative of 'Sir Anthony Absolute;' the stage-manager undertaking to supply the

necessary wrinkles from the illimitable resources of theatrical art. A lady whose age was unknown, and whose personal appearance was stout—but whose heart was in the right place—volunteered to act the part of the sentimental 'Julia,' and brought with her the dramatic qualification of habitually wearing a wig in private life. Thanks to these vigorous measures, the play was at last supplied with representatives—always excepting the two unmanageable characters of 'Lucy' the waiting-maid, and 'Falkland,'Julia's jealous lover. Gentlemen came; saw Julia at rehearsal; observed her stoutness and her wig; omitted to notice that her heart was in the right place; quailed at the prospect, apologized, and retired. Ladies read the part of 'Lucy;' remarked that she appeared to great advantage in the first half of the play, and faded out of it altogether in the latter half; objected to pass from the notice of the audience in that manner, when all the rest had a chance of distinguishing themselves to the end; shut up the book, apologized, and retired. In eight days more the night of performance would arrive; a phalanx of social martyrs two hundred strong, had been convened to witness it; three full rehearsals were absolutely necessary; and two characters in the play were not filled yet. With this lamentable story, and with the humblest apologies for presuming on a slight acquaintance, the Marrables appeared at Combe-Raven, to appeal to the young ladies for a 'Lucy,' and to the universe for a 'Falkland,' with the mendicant pertinacity of a family in despair.

This statement of circumstances—addressed to an audience which included a father of Mr. Vanstone's disposition, and a daughter of Magdalen's temperament—produced the result which might have been anticipated from the first.

Either misinterpreting, or disregarding, the ominous silence preserved by his wife and Miss Garth, Mr. Vanstone not only gave Magdalen permission to assist the forlorn dramatic company, but accepted an invitation to witness the performance for Norah and himself. Mrs. Vanstone declined accompanying them on account of her health: and Miss Garth only engaged to make one among the audience, conditionally on not being wanted at home. The 'parts' of 'Lucy' and 'Falkland' (which the distressed family carried about with them everywhere, like incidental maladies) were handed to their representatives on the spot. Frank's faint remonstrances were rejected without a hearing; the days and hours of rehearsal were carefully noted down on the covers of the parts; and the Marrables took their leave, with a perfect explosion of thanks—father, motherland daughter sowing their expressions of gratitude broadcast, from the drawing-room door to the garden-gates.

As soon as the carriage had driven away, Magdalen presented herself to the general observation under an entirely new aspect.

'If any more visitors call to-day,' she said, with the profoundest gravity of look and manner, 'I am not at home. This is a far more serious matter than any of you suppose. Go somewhere by yourself, Frank, and read over your part, and don't let your attention wander if you can possibly help it. I shall not be accessible before the evening. If you will come here—with papa's permission—after tea, my views on the subject of Falkland will be at your disposal. Thomas! whatever else the gardener does, he is not to make any floricultural noises under my window. For the rest of the afternoon, I shall be immersed in study—and the quieter the house is, the more obliged I shall feel to everybody.'

Before Miss Garth's battery of reproof could open fire, before the first outburst of Mr. Vanstone's hearty laughter could escape his lips, she bowed to them with imperturbable gravity; ascended the house-steps for the first time in her life, at a walk instead of a run; and retired then and there to the bedroom regions. Frank's helpless astonishment at her disappearance, added a new element of absurdity to the scene. He stood first on one leg and then on the other; rolling and unrolling his part, and looking piteously in the faces of the friends about him. 'I know I can't do it,' he said. 'May I come in after tea, and hear Magdalen's views? Thank you—I'll look in about eight. Don't tell my father about this acting, please: I should never hear the last of it.' Those were the

only words he had spirit enough to utter. He drifted away aimlessly in the direction of the shrubbery, with the part hanging open in his hand—the most incapable of Falldands, and the most helpless of mankind.

Frank's departure left the family by themselves, and was the signal accordingly for an attack on Mr. Vanstone's inveterate carelessness in the exercise of his paternal authority.

'What could you possibly be thinking of, Andrew, when you gave your consent?' said Mrs. Vanstone. 'Surely my silence was a sufficient warning to you to say No?'

'A mistake, Mr. Vanstone,' chimed in Miss Garth. 'Made with the best intentions—but a mistake for all that.'

'It may be a mistake,' said Norah, taking her father's part, as usual. 'But I really don't see how papa, or any one else, could have declined, under the circumstances.'

'Quite right, my dear,' observed Mr. Vanstone. 'The circumstances, as you say, were dead against me. Here were these unfortunate people in a scrape on one side; and Magdalen, on the other, mad to act. I couldn't say I had methodistical objections—I've nothing methodistical about me. What other excuse could I make? The Marrables are respectable people, and keep the best company in Clifton. Wbat harm can she get in their house? If you come to prudence and that sort of thing—why shouldn't Magdalen do what Miss Marrable does? There! there! let the poor things act, and amuse themselves. We were their age once—and it's no use making a fuss—and that's all I've got to say about it.'

With that characteristic defence of his own conduct, Mr. Vanstone sauntered back to the greenhouse to smoke another cigar.

'I didn't say so to papa,' said Norah, taking her mother's arm on the way back to the house, 'but the bad result of the acting, in my opinion, will be the familiarity it is sure to encourage between Magdalen and Francis Clare.'

'You are prejudiced against Frank, my love,' said Mrs. Vanstone.

Norah's soft, secret, hazel eyes sank to the ground; she said no more. Her opinions were unchangeable—but she never disputed with anybody. She had the great failing of a reserved nature—the failing of obstinacy; and the great merit—the meijt of silence. 'What is your head running on now?' thought Miss Garth, casting a sharp look at Norah's dark, downcast face. 'You're one of the impenetrable sort. Give me Magdalen, with all her perversities; I can see daylight through her. You're as dark as night.'

The hours of the afternoon passed away, and still Magdalen remained shut up in her own room. No restless footsteps pattered on the stairs; no nimble tongue was heard chattering here, there, and everywhere, from the garret to the kitchen—the house seemed hardly like itself, with the one ever-disturbing element in the family serenity suddenly withdrawn from it. Anxious to witness, with her own eyes, the reality of a transformation in which past experience still inclined her to disbelieve, Miss Garth ascended to Magdalen's room, knocked twice at the door, received no answer, opened it, and looked in.

There sat Magdalen, in an arm-chair before the long looking-glass, with all her hair let down over her shoulders; absorbed in the study of her part; and comfortably arrayed in her morning wrapper, until it was time to dress for dinner. And there behind her sat the lady's-maid, slowly combing out the long heavy locks of her young mistress's hair, with the sleepy resignation of a woman who had been engaged in that employment for some hours past. The sun was shining; and the green shutters outside the window were closed. The dim light fell tenderly on the two quiet seated figures; on the little white bed, with the knots of rose-coloured ribbon which looped up its curtains, and the bright dress for dinner laid ready across it; on the gaily painted bath, with its pure

lining of white enamel; on the toilet-table with its sparkling trinkets, its crystal botdes, its silver bell with Cupid for a handle, its fitter of little luxuries that adorn the shrine of a woman's bedchamber. The luxurious tranquillity of the scene; the cool fragrance of flowers and perfumes in the atmosphere; the rapt attitude of Magdalen, absorbed over her reading; the monotonous regularity of movement in the maid's hand and arm, as she drew the comb smoothly through and through her mistress's hair—all conveyed the same soothing impression of drowsy delicious quiet. On one side of the door were the broad daylight, and the familiar realities of fife. On the other, was the dreamland of Elysian serenity—the sanctuary of unruffled repose.

Miss Garth paused on the threshold, and looked into the room in silence.

Magdalen's curious fancy for having her hair combed at all times and seasons, was among the peculiarities of her character which were notorious to everybody in the house. It was one of her father's favourite jokes, that she reminded him, on such occasions, of a cat having her back stroked, and that he always expected, if the combing were only continued long enough, to hear her *purr.* Extravagant as it may seem, the comparison was not altogether inappropriate. The girl's fervid temperament intensified the essentially feminine pleasure that most women feel in the passage of the comb through their hair, to a luxury of sensation which absorbed her in enjoyment, so serenely self-demonstrative, so drowsily deep, that it did irresistibly suggest a pet cat's enjoyment under a caressing hand. Intimately as Miss Garth was acquainted with this peculiarity in her pupil, she now saw it asserting itself for the first time, in association with mental exertion of any kind on Magdalen's part. Feeling, therefore, some curiosity to know how long the combing and the studying had gone on together, she ventured on putting the question, first to the mistress; and (receiving no answer in that quarter) secondly to the maid.

'All the afternoon, Miss, off and on,' was the weary answer. 'Miss Magdalen says it soothes her feelings and clears her mind.'

Knowing by experience that interference would be hopeless, under these circumstances, Miss Garth turned sharply and left the room. She smiled when she was outside on the landing. The female mind does occasionally —though not often—project itself into the future. Miss Garth was prophetically pitying Magdalen's unfortunate husband.

Dinner-time presented the fair student to the family eye in the same mentally absorbed aspect. On all ordinary occasions Magdalen's appetite would have terrified those feeble sentimentalists, who affect to ignore the all-important influence which female feeding exerts in the production of female beauty. On this occasion, she refused one dish after another with a resolution which implied the rarest of all modern martyrdoms—gastric martyrdom. 'I have conceived the part of Lucy,' she observed, with the demurest gravity. 'The next difficulty is to make Frank conceive the part of Falkland. I see nothing to laugh at—you would all be serious enough if you had my responsibilities. No, papa—no wine to-day, thank you. I must keep my intelligence clear. Water, Thomas—and a little more jelly, I think, before you take it away.'

When Frank presented himself in the evening, ignorant of the first elements of his part, she took him in hand, as a middle-aged schoolmistress might have taken in hand a backward little boy. The few attempts he made to vary the sternly practical nature of the evening's occupation by slipping in compliments sidelong, she put away from her with the contemptuous self-possession of a woman of twice her age. She literally forced him into his part. Her father fell asleep in his chair. Mrs. Vanstone and Miss Garth lost their interest in the proceedings, retired to the farther end of the room, and spoke together in whispers. It grew later and later; and still Magdalen never flinched from her task—still, with equal perseverance, Norah, who had been on the watch all through the evening, kept on the watch to the end. The distrust darkened and darkened on her face as she looked at her sister and Frank; as she saw how close they sat together, devoted to the same interest and working to the same end. The clock on the mantelpiece pointed to half-past eleven, before Lucy the resolute, permitted Falkland the

helpless to shut up his task-book for the night. ‘She’s wonderfully clever, isn’t she?’ said Frank, taking leave of Mr. Vanstone at the hall-door. ‘I’m to come to-morrow, and hear more of her views—if you have no objection. I shall never do it; don’t tell her I said so. As fast as she teaches me one speech, the other goes out of my head. Discouraging, isn’t it? Good night.’

The next day but one was the day of the first full rehearsal. On the previous evening Mrs. Vanstone’s spirits had been sadly depressed. At a private interview with Miss Garth, she had referred again, of her own accord, to the subject of her letter from London—had spoken self-reproachfully of her weakness in admitting Captain Wragge’s impudent claim to a family connection with her—and had then reverted to the state of her health, and to the doubtful prospect that awaited her in the coming summer, in a tone of despondency which it was very distressing to hear. Anxious to cheer her spirits, Miss Garth had changed the conversation as soon as possible—had referred to the approaching theatrical performance—and had relieved Mrs. Vanstone’s mind of all anxiety in that direction, by announcing her intention of accompanying Magdalen to each rehearsal, and of not losing sight of her until she was safely back again in her father’s house. Accordingly, when Frank presented himself at Combe-Raven on the eventful morning, there stood Miss Garth, prepared—in the interpolated character of Argus*—to accompany Lucy and Falkland to the scene of trial. The railway conveyed the three, in excellent time, to Evergreen Lodge; and at one o’clock the rehearsal began.

Chapter VI

‘I hope Miss Vanstone knows her part?’ whispered Mrs. Marrable, anxiously addressing herself to Miss Garth, in a corner of the theatre.

‘If airs and graces make an actress, ma’am, Magdalen’s performance will astonish us all.’ With that reply, Miss Garth took out her work, and seated herself, on guard, in the centre of the pit.

The manager perched himself, book in hand, on a stool close in front of the stage. He was an active little man, of a sweet and cheerful temper; and he gave the signal to begin, with as patient an interest in the proceedings as if they had caused him no trouble in the past, and promised him no difficulty in the future. The two characters which open the comedy of The Rivals, ‘Fag,’ and the ‘Coachman,’ appeared on the scene—looked many sizes too tall for their canvas background, which represented a ‘Street in Bath’—exhibited the customary inability to manage their own arms, legs, and voices—went out severally at the wrong exits—and expressed their perfect approval of results, so far, by laughing heartily behind the scenes. ‘Silence, gentlemen, if you please,’ remonstrated the cheerful manager. ‘As loud as you like *on* the stage, but the audience mustn’t hear you *off* it. Miss Marrable ready? Miss Vanstone ready? Easy there with the “Street in Bath;” it’s going up crooked! Face this way, Miss Marrable; full face, if you please. Miss Vanstone———’ he checked himself suddenly. ‘Curious,’ he said, under his breath—‘she fronts the audience of her own accord!’ Lucy opened the scene in these words: ‘Indeed, ma’am, I traversed half the town in search of it: I don’t believe there’s a circulating library in Bath I haven’t been at.’ The manager started in his chair. ‘My heart alive! she speaks out without telling!’ The dialogue went on. Lucy produced the novels for Miss Lydia Languish’s private reading from under her cloak. The manager rose excitably to his feet. Marvellous! No hurry with the books; no dropping them. She looked at the titles before she announced them to her mistress; she set down ‘Humphry Clinker’ on ‘The Tears of Sensibility’ with a smart little smack which pointed the antithesis. One moment—and she announced Julia’s visit; another—and she dropped the brisk waiting-maid’s curtsey; a third—and she was off the stage on the side set down for her in the book. The manager wheeled round on his stool, and looked hard at Miss Garth. ‘I beg

your pardon, ma'am,' he said. 'Miss Marrable told me, before we began, that this was the young lady's first attempt. It can't be surely?'

'It is,' replied Miss Garth, reflecting the manager's look of amazement on her own face. Was it possible that Magdalen's unintelligible industry in the study of her part, really sprang from a serious interest in her occupation—an interest which implied a natural fitness for it?

The rehearsal went on. The stout lady with the wig (and the excellent heart) personated the sentimental Julia from an inveterately tragic point of view, and used her handkerchief distractedly in the first scene. The spinster-relative felt Mrs. Malaprop's mistakes in language so seriously, and took such extraordinary pains with her blunders, that they sounded more like exercises in elocution than anything else. The unhappy lad who led the forlorn hope of the company, in the person of 'Sir Anthony Absolute,' expressed the age and irascibility of his character by tottering incessantly at the knees, and thumping the stage perpetually with his stick. Slowly and clumsily, with constant interruptions, and interminable mistakes, the first act dragged on, until Lucy appeared again to end it in soliloquy, with the confession of her assumed simplicity and the praise of her own cunning.

Here, the stage artifice of the situation presented difficulties which Magdalen had not encountered in the first scene—and here, her total want of experience led her into more than one palpable mistake. The stage-manager, with an eagerness which he had not shown in the case of any other member of the company, interfered immediately, and set her right. At one point she was to pause, and take a turn on the stage—she did it. At another, she was to stop, toss her head, and look pertly at the audience—she did it. When she took out the paper to read the list of the presents she had received, could she give it a tap with her finger (Yes)? And lead off with a little laugh (Yes—after twice trying)? Could she read the different items with a sly look at the end of each sentence, straight at the pit (Yes, straight at the pit, and as sly as you please)? The manager's cheerful face beamed with approval. He tucked the play under his arm, and clapped his hands gaily; the gentlemen, clustered together behind the scenes, followed his example; the ladies looked at each other with dawning doubts whether they had not better have left the new recruit in the retirement of private life. Too deeply absorbed in the business of the stage to heed any of them, Magdalen asked leave to repeat the soliloquy, and make quite sure of her own improvement. She went all through it again, without a mistake, this time, from beginning to end; the manager celebrating her attention to his directions by an outburst of professional approbation, which escaped him in spite of himself. 'She can take a hint!' cried the litde man, with a hearty smack of his hand on the prompt-book. 'She's a born actress, if ever there was one yet!'

'I hope not,' said Miss Garth to herself, taking up the work which had dropped into her lap, and looking down at it in some perplexity. Her worst apprehension of results in connection with the theatrical enterprise, had foreboded levity of conduct with some of the gentlemen—she had not bargained for this. Magdalen, in the capacity of a thoughtless girl, was comparatively easy to deal with. Magdalen, in the character of a bom actress, threatened serious future difficulties.

The rehearsal proceeded. Lucy returned to the stage for her scenes in the second act (the last in which she appears) with Sir Lucius and Fag. Here, again, Magdalen's inexperience betrayed itself—and here once more her resolution in attacking and conquering her own mistakes astonished everybody. 'Bravo!' cried the gentlemen behind the scenes, as she steadily trampled down one blunder after another. 'Ridiculous!' said the ladies, 'with such a small part as hers.' 'Heaven forgive me!' thought Miss Garth, coining round unwillingly to the general opinion. 'I almost wish we were Papists, and had a convent to put her in to-morrow.' One of Mr. Marrable's servants entered the theatre as that desperate aspiration escaped the governess. She instantly sent the man behind the scenes with a message:—'Miss Vanstone has done her part in the rehearsal: request her to come here, and sit by me.' The servant returned with a polite apology:—'Miss Vanstone's kind love, and she begs to

be excused—she's prompting Mr. Clare.' She prompted him to such purpose that he actually got through his part. The performances of the other gendemen were obtrusively imbecile. Frank was just one degree better—he was modestly incapable; and he gained by comparison. 'Thanks to Miss Vanstone,' observed the manager, who had heard the prompting. 'She pulled him through. We shall be flat enough at night, when the drop falls on the second act, and the audience have seen the last of her. It's a thousand pities she hasn't got a better part!'

'It's a thousand mercies she's no more to do than she has,' muttered Miss Garth, overhearing him. 'As things are, the people can't well turn her head with applause. She's out of the play in the second act—that's one comfort!'

No well-regulated mind ever draws its inferences in a hurry; Miss Garth's mind was well regulated; therefore, logically speaking, Miss Garth ought to have been superior to the weakness of rushing at conclusions. She had committed that error, nevertheless, under present circumstances. In plainer terms, the consoling reflection which had just occurred to her, assumed that the play had by this time survived all its disasters, and entered on its long-deferred career of success. The play had done nothing of the sort. Misfortune and the Marrable family had not parted company yet.

When the rehearsal was over, nobody observed that the stout lady with the wig privately withdrew herself from the company; and when she was afterwards missed from the table of refreshments, which Mr. Marrable's hospitality kept ready spread in a room near the theatre, nobody imagined that there was any serious reason for her absence. It was not till the ladies and gentlemen assembled for the next rehearsal, that the true state of the case was impressed on the minds of the company. At the appointed hour no Julia appeared. In her stead, Mrs. Marrable portentously approached the stage, with an open letter in her hand. She was naturally a lady of the mildest good breeding: she was mistress of every bland conventionality in the English language—but disasters and dramatic influences combined, threw even this harmless matron off her balance at last. For the first time in her life Mrs. Marrable indulged in vehement gesture, and used strong language. She handed the letter sternly, at arm's length, to her daughter. 'My dear,' she said, with an aspect of awful composure, 'we are under a Curse.' Before the amazed dramatic company could petition for an explanation, she turned, and left the room. The manager's professional eye followed her out respectfully—he looked as if he approved of the exit, from a theatrical point of view.

What new misfortune had befallen the play? The last and worst of ah misfortunes had assailed it. The stout lady had resigned her part.

Not maliciously. Her heart, which had been in the right place throughout, remained inflexibly in the right place still. Her explanation of the circumstances proved this, if nothing else did. The letter began with a statement:—She had overheard, at the last rehearsal (quite unintentionally) personal remarks of which she was the subject. They might, or might not have had reference to her—Hair; and her—Figure. She would not distress Mrs. Marrable by repeating them. Neither would she mention names, because it was foreign to her nature to make bad worse. The only course at all consistent with her own self-respect, was to resign her part. She enclosed it accordingly to Mrs. Marrable, with many apologies for her presumption in undertaking a youthful character, at —what a gentleman was pleased to term—her Age; and with what two ladies were rude enough to characterize as her disadvantages of—Hair, and—Figure. A younger and more attractive representative of Julia, would no doubt be easily found. In the mean time, all persons concerned had her full forgiveness, to which she would only beg leave to add her best and kindest wishes for the success of the play.

In four nights more the play was to be performed. If ever any human enterprise stood in need of good wishes to help it, that enterprise was unquestionably the theatrical entertainment at Evergreen Lodge!

One arm-chair was allowed on the stage; and, into that arm-chair, Miss Marrable sank, preparatory to a fit of hysterics. Magdalen stepped forward at the first convulsion; snatched the letter from Miss Marrable's hand; and stopped the threatened catastrophe.

'She's an ugly, bald-headed, malicious, middle-aged wretch,' said Magdalen, tearing the letter into fragments, and tossing them over the heads of the company. 'But I can tell her one thing—she sha'n't spoil the play. I'll act Julia.'

'Bravo!' cried the chorus of gendemen—the anonymous gendeman who had helped to do the mischief (otherwise Mr. Francis Clare) loudest of all. /

'If you want the truth, I don't shrink from owning it,' continued Magdalen. 'I'm one of the ladies she means. I said she had a head like a mop, and a waist like a bolster. So she has.'

'I am the other lady,' added the spinster-relative. 'But / only said she was too stout for the part.'

'I am the gentleman,' chimed in Frank, stimulated by the force of example. 'I said nothing—I only agreed with the ladies.'

Here Miss Garth seized her opportunity, and addressed the stage loudly from the pit.

'Stop! stop!' she said. 'You can't settle the difficulty that way. If Magdalen plays Julia, who is to play Lucy?'

Miss Marrable sank back in the arm-chair, and gave way to the second convulsion.

'Stuff and nonsense!' cried Magdalen, 'the thing's simple enough. I'll act Julia and Lucy both together.'

The manager was consulted on the spot. Suppressing Lucy's first entrance, and turning the short dialogue about the novels into a soliloquy for Lydia Languish, appeared to be the only changes of importance necessary to the accomplishment of Magdalen's project. Lucy's two telling scenes at the end of the first and second acts, were sufficiently removed from the scenes in which Julia appeared, to give time for the necessary transformations in dress. Even Miss Garth, though she tried hard to find them, could put no fresh obstacles in the way. The question was settled in five minutes, and the rehearsal went on; Magdalen learning Julia's stage situations with the book in her hand, and announcing afterwards, on the journey home, that she proposed sitting up all night to study the new part. Frank thereupon expressed his fears that she would have no time left to help him through his theatrical difficulties. She tapped him on the shoulder coquettishly with her part. 'You foolish fellow, how am I to do without you? You're Julia's jealous lover; you're always making Julia cry. Come tonight, and make me cry at tea-time. You haven't got a venomous old woman in a wig to act with now. It's *my* heart you're to break —and of course I shall teach you how to do it.'

The four days' interval passed busily in perpetual rehearsals, public and private. The night of performance arrived; the guests assembled; the great dramatic experiment stood on its trial. Magdalen had made the most of her opportunities; she had learnt all that the manager could teach her in the time. Miss Garth left her when the overture began, sitting apart in a comer behind the scenes, serious and silent, with her smelling-bottle in one hand, and her book in the other, resolutely training herself for the coming ordeal, to the very last.

The play began, with all the proper accompaniments of a theatrical performance in private life; with a crowded audience, an African temperature, a bursting of heated lamp-glasses, and a difficulty in drawing up the curtain. 'Fag,' and 'the Coachman,' who opened the scene, took leave of their memories as soon as they stepped on the stage; left half their dialogue unspoken; came to a dead pause; were audibly entreated by the invisible manager to 'come off;' and went off accordingly, in every respect sadder and wiser men than when they went on. The

next scene disclosed Miss Marrable as ‘Lydia Languish,’ gracefully seated, very pretty, beautifully dressed, accurately mistress of the smallest words in her part; possessed, in short, of every personal resource—except her voice. The ladies admired, the gendemen applauded. Nobody heard anything, but the words ‘Speak up, Miss,’ whispered by the same voice which had already entreated Fag and the Coachman to ‘come off’ A responsive titter rose among the younger spectators; checked immediately by magnanimous applause. The temperature of the audience was rising to Blood Heat—but the national sense of fair play was not boiled out of them yet.

In the midst of the demonstration, Magdalen quietly made her first entrance, as ‘Julia.’ She was dressed very plainly in dark colours, and wore her own hair; all stage adjuncts and alterations (excepting the slightest possible touch of rouge on her cheeks) having been kept in reserve, to disguise her the more effectually in her second part. The grace and simplicity of her costume, the steady self-possession with which she looked out over the eager rows of faces before her, raised a low hum of approval and expectation. She spoke—after suppressing a momentary tremor—with a quiet distinctness of utterance which reached all ears, and which at once confirmed the favourable impression that her appearance had produced. The one member of the audience who looked at her and listened to her coldly, was her elder sister. Before the actress of the evening had been five minutes on the stage, Norah detected, to her own indescribable astonishment, that Magdalen had audaciously individualized the feeble amiability of ‘Julia’s’ character, by seizing no less a person than herself as the model to act it by. She saw all her own little formal peculiarities of manner and movement, unblushingly reproduced—and even the very tone of her voice so accurately mimicked from time to time, that the accents startled her as if she was speaking herself, with an echo on the stage. The effect of this cool appropriation of Norah’s identity to theatrical purposes, on the audience—who only saw results—asserted itself in a storm of applause on Magdalen’s exit. She had won two incontestable triumphs in her first scene. By a dexterous piece of mimicry, she had made a living reality of one of the most insipid characters in the English drama; and she had roused to enthusiasm an audience of two hundred exiles from the blessings of ventilation, all simmering together in their own animal heat. Under the circumstances, where is the actress by profession who could have done much more?

But the event of the evening was still to come. Magdalen’s disguised reappearance at the end of the act, in the character of ‘Lucy’—with false hair and false eyebrows, with a bright-red complexion and patches on her cheeks, with the gayest colours flaunting in her dress, and the shrillest vivacity of voice and manner—fairly staggered the audience. They looked down at their programmes, in which the representative of Lucy figured under an assumed name; looked up again at the stage; penetrated the disguise; and vented their astonishment in another round of applause, louder and heartier even than the last. Norah herself could not deny this time, that the tribute of approbation had been well deserved. There, forcing its way steadily through all the faults of inexperience—there, plainly visible to the dullest of the spectators, was the rare faculty of dramatic impersonation, expressing itself in every look and action of this girl of eighteen, who now stood on a stage for the first time in her life. Failing in many minor requisites of the double task which she had undertaken, she succeeded in the one important necessity of keeping the main distinctions of the two characters thoroughly apart. Everybody felt that the difficulty lay here—everybody saw the difficulty conquered—everybody echoed the manager’s enthusiasm at rehearsal, which had hailed her as a born actress.

When the drop-scene descended for the first time, Magdalen had concentrated in herself the whole interest and attraction of the play. The audience politely applauded Miss Marrable, as became the guests assembled in her father’s house: and good-humouredly encouraged the remainder of the company, to help them through a task for which they were all, more or less, palpably unfit. But, as the play proceeded, nothing roused them to any genuine expression of interest when Magdalen was absent from the scene. There was no disguising it: Miss Marrable and her bosom friends had been all hopelessly cast in the shade by the new recruit whom they had summoned to assist them, in the capacity of forlorn hope. And this on Miss Marrable’s own birthday! and this in her father’s house! and this after the unutterable sacrifices of six weeks past! Of all the domestic disasters which

the thankless theatrical enterprise had inflicted on the Marrable family, the crowning misfortune was now consummated by Magdalen's success.

Leaving Mr. Vanstone and Norah, on the conclusion of the play, among the guests in the supper-room, Miss Garth went behind the scenes; ostensibly anxious to see if she could be of any use; really bent on ascertaining whether Magdalen's head had been turned by the triumphs of the evening. It would not have surprised Miss Garth if she had discovered her pupil in the act of making terms with the manager for her forthcoming appearance in a public theatre. As events really turned out, she found Magdalen on the stage, receiving, with gracious smiles, a card which the manager presented to her with a professional bow. Noticing Miss Garth's mute look of inquiry, the civil little man hastened to explain that the card was his own, and that he was merely asking the favour of Miss Vanstone's recommendation at any future opportunity.

'This is not the last time the young lady will be concerned in private theatricals, I'll answer for it,' said the manager. 'And if a superintendent is wanted on the next occasion, she has kindly promised to say a good word for me. I am always to be heard of, Miss, at that address.' Saying those words, he bowed again, and discreetly disappeared.

Vague suspicions beset the mind of Miss Garth, and urged her to insist on looking at the card. No more harmless morsel of pasteboard was ever passed from one hand to another. The card contained nothing but the manager's name, and, under it, the name and address of a theatrical agent in London.

'It is not worth the trouble of keeping,' said Miss Garth.

Magdalen caught her hand, before she could throw the card away—possessed herself of it the next instant—and put it in her pocket.

'I promised to recommend him,' she said—'and that's one reason for keeping his card. If it does nothing else, it will remind me of the happiest evening of my life—and that's another. Come!' she cried, throwing her arms round Miss Garth with a feverish gaiety—'congratulate me on my success!'

'I will congratulate you when you have got over it,' said Miss Garth.

In half an hour more, Magdalen had changed her dress; had joined the guests; and had soared into an atmosphere of congratulation, high above the reach of any controlling influence that Miss Garth could exercise. Frank, dilatory in all his proceedings, was the last of the dramatic company who left the precincts of the stage. He made no attempt to join Magdalen in the supper-room—but he was ready in the hall, with her cloak, when the carriages were called and the party broke up.

'Oh, Frank!' she said, looking round at him, as he put the cloak on her shoulders, 'I am so sorry it's all over! Come to-morrow morning, and let's talk about it by ourselves.'

'In the shrubbery at ten?' asked Frank in a whisper.

She drew up the hood of her cloak, and nodded to him gaily. Miss Garth, standing near, noticed the looks that passed between them, though the disturbance made by the parting guests prevented her from hearing the words. There was a soft, underlying tenderness in Magdalen's assumed gaiety of manner—there was a sudden thoughtfulness in her face, a confidential readiness in her hand, as she took Frank's arm and went out to the carriage. What did it mean? Had her passing interest in him, as her stage-pupil, treacherously sown the seeds of any deeper interest in him, as a man? Had the idle theatrical scheme, now that it was all over, graver results to answer for than a mischievous waste of time?

The lines on Miss Garth's face deepened and hardened: she stood lost among the fluttering crowd around her. Norah's warning words, addressed to Mrs. Vanstone in the garden, recurred to her memory—and now, for the first time, the idea dawned on her that Norah had seen consequences in their true light.

Chapter VII

Early the next morning Miss Garth and Norah met in the garden, and spoke together privately. The only noticeable result of the interview, when they presented themselves at the breakfast-table, appeared in the marked silence which they both maintained on the topic of the theatrical performance. Mrs. Vanstone was entirely indebted to her husband and to her youngest daughter for all that she heard of the evening's entertainment. The governess and the elder daughter had evidently determined on letting the subject drop.

After breakfast was over, Magdalen proved to be missing, when the ladies assembled as usual in the morning-room. Her habits were so little regular that Mrs. Vanstone felt neither surprise nor uneasiness at her absence. Miss Garth and Norah looked at one another significantly, and waited in silence. Two hours passed—and there were no signs of Magdalen. Norah rose, as the clock struck twelve, and quietly left the room to look for her.

She was not up-stairs, dusting her jewelry and disarranging her dresses. She was not in the conservatory, not in the flower-garden; not in the kitchen teasing the cook; not in the yard playing with the dogs. Had she, by any chance, gone out with her father? Mr. Vanstone had announced his intention, at the breakfast-table, of paying a morning visit to his old ally, Mr. Clare, and of rousing the philosopher's sarcastic indignation by an account of the dramatic performance. None of the other ladies at Combe-Raven ever ventured themselves inside the cottage. But Magdalen was reckless enough for anything—and Magdalen might have gone there. As the idea occurred to her, Norah entered the shrubbery.

At the second turning, where the path among the trees wound away out of sight of the house, she came suddenly face to face with Magdalen and Frank: they were sauntering towards her, arm-in-arm; their heads close together, their conversation apparently proceeding in whispers. They looked suspiciously handsome and happy. At the sight of Norah, both started, and both stopped. Frank confusedly raised his hat, and turned back in the direction of his father's cottage. Magdalen advanced to meet her sister, carelessly swinging her closed parasol from side to side, carelessly humming an air from the overture which had preceded the rising of the curtain on the previous night.

'Luncheon time already!' she said, looking at her watch. 'Surely not?'

'Have you and Mr. Francis Clare been alone in the shrubbery since ten o'clock?' asked Norah.

'Mr. Francis Clare! How ridiculously formal you are. Why don't you call him Frank?'

'I asked you a question, Magdalen.'

'Dear me, how black you look this morning! I'm in disgrace, I suppose. Haven't you forgiven me yet for my acting last night? I couldn't help it, love; I should have made nothing of Julia, if I hadn't taken you for my model. It's quite a question of Art. In your place, I should have felt flattered by the selection.'

'In *your* place, Magdalen, I should have thought twice before I mimicked my sister to an audience of strangers.'

‘That’s exactly why I did it—an audience of strangers. How were they to know? Come! come! don’t be angry. You are eight years older than I am—you ought to set me an example of good humour.’

‘I will set you an example of plain-speaking. I am more sorry than I can say, Magdalen, to meet you as I met you here just now!’

‘What next, I wonder? You meet me in the shrubbery at home, talking over the private theatricals with my old playfellow, whom I knew when I was no taller them this parasol. And that is a glaring impropriety, is it? Honi soit qui mal y pense. You wanted an answer a minute ago—there it is for you, my dear, in the choicest Norman-French.’

‘I am in earnest about this, Magdalen———’

‘Not a doubt of it. Nobody can accuse you of ever making jokes.’

‘I am seriously sorry———’

‘Oh dear!’

‘It is quite useless to interrupt me. I have it on my conscience to tell you—and I *will* tell you—that I am sorry to see how this intimacy is growing. I am sorry to see a secret understanding established already between you and Mr. Francis Clare.’

‘Poor Frank! How you do hate him to be sure. What on earth has he done to offend you?’

Norah’s self-control began to show signs of failing her. Her dark cheeks glowed, her delicate lips trembled, before she spoke again. Magdalen paid more attention to her parasol than to her sister. She tossed it high in the air, and caught it. ‘Once!’ she said—and tossed it up again. ‘Twice!’—and she tossed it higher. ‘Thrice !’ Before she could catch it for the third time, Norah seized her passionately by the arm, and the parasol dropped to the ground between them.

‘You are treating me heartlessly,’ she said. ‘For shame, Magdalen—for shame!’

The irrepressible outburst of a reserved nature, forced into open self-assertion in its own despite, is of all moral forces the hardest to resist. Magdalen was startled into silence. For a moment, the two sisters—so strangely dissimilar in person and character—faced one another, without a word passing between them. For a moment, the deep brown eyes of the elder, and the light grey eyes of the younger, looked into each other with steady unyielding scrutiny on either side. Norah’s face was the first to change; Norah’s head was the first to turn away. She dropped her sister’s arm, in silence. Magdalen stooped, and picked up her parasol.

‘I try to keep my temper,’ she said, ‘and you call me heardess for doing it. You always were hard on me, and you always will be.’

Norah clasped her trembling hands fast in each other. ‘Hard on you!’ she said, in low, mournful tones—and sighed bitterly.

Magdalen drew back a little, and mechanically dusted the parasol with the end of her garden cloak.

‘Yes!’ she resumed, doggedly. ‘Hard on me, and hard on Frank.’

‘Frank!’ repeated Norah, advancing on her sister, and turning pale as suddenly as she had turned red. ‘Do you talk of yourself and Frank as if your interests were One already? Magdalen! if I hurt *you*, do I hurt *him*? Is he so

near and so dear to you as that?'

Magdalen drew farther and farther back. A twig from a tree near caught her cloak; she turned petulandy, broke it off, and threw it on the ground. 'What right have you to question me?' she broke out on a sudden. 'Whether I like Frank, or whether I don't, what interest is it of yours?' As she said the words, she abruptly stepped forward to pass her sister, and return to the house.

Norah, turning paler and paler, barred the way to her. 'If I hold you by main force,' she said, 'you shall stop and hear me. I have watched this Francis Clare; I know him better than you do. He is unworthy of a moment's serious feeling on your part; he is unworthy of our dear, good, kind-hearted father's interest in him. A man with any principle, any honour, any gratitude, would not have come back as he has come back, disgraced—yes! disgraced by his spiridess neglect of his own duty. I watched his face while the friend who has been better than a father to him, was comforting and forgiving him with a kindness he had not deserved: I watched his face, and I saw no shame, and no distress in it—I saw nothing but a look of thankless, heartless relief. He is selfish, he is ungrateful, he is ungenerous—he is only twenty, and he has the worst failings of a mean old age already. And this is the man I find you meeting in secret—the man who has taken such a place in your favour that you are deaf to the truth about him, even from *my* lips! Magdalen! this will end ill. For God's sake, think of what I have said to you, and control yourself before it is too late!' She stopped, vehement and breathless, and caught her sister anxiously by the hand.

Magdalen looked at her in unconcealed astonishment.

'You are so violent,' she said, 'and so unlike yourself that I hardly know you. The more patient I am, the more hard words I get for my pains. You have taken a perverse hatred to Frank; and you are unreasonably angry with me, because I won't hate him too. Don't, Norah! you hurt my hand.'

Norah pushed the hand from her, contemptuously. 'I shall never hurt your heart,' she said—and suddenly turned her back on Magdalen as she spoke the words.

There was a momentary pause. Norah kept her position. Magdalen looked at her perplexedly—hesitated—then walked away by herself towards the house.

At the turn in the shrubbery path, she stopped, and looked back uneasily. 'Oh, dear, dear!' she thought to herself, 'why didn't Frank go when I told him?' She hesitated, and went back a few steps. 'There's Norah standing on her dignity, as obstinate as ever.' She stopped again. 'What had I better do? I hate quarrelling: I think I'll make it up.' She ventured close to her sister, and touched her on the shoulder. Norah never moved. 'It's not often she flies into a passion,' thought Magdalen, touching her again; 'but when she does, what a time it lasts her!—Come!' she said, 'give me a kiss, Norah, and make it up. Won't you let me get at any part of you, my dear, but the back of your neck? Well, it's a very nice neck—it's better worth kissing than mine—and there the kiss is, in spite of you!'

She caught fast hold of Norah from behind, and suited the action to the word, with a total disregard of all that had just passed, which her sister was far from emulating. Hardly a minute since, the warm outpouring of Norah's heart had burst through all obstacles. Had the icy reserve frozen her up again already! It was hard to say. She never spoke; she never changed her position—she only searched hurriedly for her handkerchief. As she drew it out, there was a sound of approaching footsteps in the inner recesses of the shrubbery. A Scotch terrier scampered into view; and a cheerful voice sang the first lines of the glee in "As You Like It." 'It's papa!' cried Magdalen. 'Come, Norah—come and meet him.'

Instead of following her sister, Norah pulled down the veil of her garden hat; turned in the opposite direction;

and hurried back to the house.

She ran up to her own room, and locked herself in. She was crying bitterly.

Chapter VIII

When Magdalen and her father met in the shrubbery, Mr. Vanstone's face showed plainly that something had happened to please him, since he had left home in the morning. He answered the question which his daughter's curiosity at once addressed to him, by informing her that he had just come from Mr. Clare's cottage; and that he had picked up, in that unpromising locality, a startling piece of news for the family at Combe-Raven.

On entering the philosopher's study, that morning, Mr. Vanstone had found him still dawdling over his late breakfast, with an open letter by his side, in place of the book which, on other occasions, lay ready to his hand at mealtimes. He held up the letter, the moment his visitor came into the room; and abruptly opened the conversation by asking Mr. Vanstone if his nerves were in good order, and if he felt himself strong enough for the shock of an overwhelming surprise.

'Nerves?' repeated Mr. Vanstone. 'Thank God, I know nothing about my nerves. If you have got anything to tell me, shock or no shock, out with it on the spot.'

Mr. Clare held the letter a litde higher, and frowned at his visitor across the breakfast-table. 'What have I always told you?' he asked, with his sourest solemnity of look and manner.

'A great deal more than I could ever keep in my head,' answered Mr. Vanstone.

'In your presence and out of it,' continued Mr. Clare, 'I have always maintained that the one important phenomenon presented by modem society is—the enormous prosperity of Fools. Show me an individual Fool, and I will show you an aggregate Society which gives that highly-favoured personage nine chances out of ten—and grudges the tenth to the wisest man in existence. Look where you will, in every high place there sits an Ass, settled beyond the reach of all the greatest intellects in this world to pull him down. Over our whole social system, complacent Imbecility rules supreme—snuffs out the searching light of Intelligence, with total impunity—and hoots, owl-like, in answer to every form of protest, See how well we all do in the dark! One of these days that audacious assertion will be practically contradicted; and the whole rotten system of modem society will come down with a crash.'

'God forbid!' cried Mr. Vanstone, looking about him as if the crash was coming already.

'With a crash!' repeated Mr. Clare. 'There is my theory, in few words. Now for the remarkable application of it, which this letter suggests. Here is my lout of a boy '

'You don't mean that Frank has got another chance!' exclaimed Mr. Vanstone.

'Here is this perfectly hopeless booby, Frank,' pursued the philosopher. 'He has never done anything in his life to help himself, and as a necessary consequence, Society is in a conspiracy to carry him to the top of the tree. He has hardly had time to throw away that chance you gave him, before this letter comes, and puts the ball at his foot for the second time. My rich cousin (who is intellectually fit to be at the tail of the family, and who is therefore as a matter of course, at the head of it), has been good enough to remember my existence; and has

offered his influence to serve my eldest boy. Read his letter, and then observe the sequence of events. My rich cousin is a booby who thrives on landed properly; he has done something for another booby who thrives on Politics, who knows a third booby who thrives on Commerce, who can do something for a fourth booby, thriving at present on nothing, whose name is Frank. So the mill goes. So the cream of all human rewards is sipped in endless succession by the Fools. I shall pack Frank off to-morrow. In course of time, he'll come back again on our hands like a bad shilling: more chances will fall in his way, as a necessary consequence of his meritorious imbecility. Years will go on—I may not live to see it, no more may you—it doesn't matter; Frank's future is equally certain either way—put him into the army, the church, politics, what you please, and let him drift: he'll end in being a general, a bishop, or a minister of state, by dint of the great modem qualification of doing nothing whatever to deserve his place.' With this summary of his son's worldly prospects, Mr. Clare tossed the letter contemptuously across the table, and poured himself out another cup of tea.

Mr. Vanstone read the letter with eager interest and pleasure. It was written in a tone of somewhat elaborate cordiality; but the practical advantages which it placed at Frank's disposal were beyond all doubt. The writer had the means of using a friend's interest—interest of no ordinary kind—with a great Mercantile Firm in the City; and he had at once exerted this influence in favour of Mr. Clare's eldest boy. Frank would be received in the office on a very different footing from the footing of an ordinary clerk; he would be 'pushed on' at every available opportunity; and the first 'good thing' the House had to offer either at home or abroad, would be placed at his disposal. If he possessed fair abilities and showed common diligence in exercising them, his fortune was made; and the sooner he was sent to London to begin, the better for his own interests it would be.

'Wonderful news!' cried Mr. Vanstone, returning the letter. 'I'm delighted—I must go back and tell them at home. This is fifty times the chance that mine was. What the deuce do you mean by abusing Society? Society has behaved uncommonly well, in my opinion. Where's Frank?'

'Lurking,' said Mr. Clare. 'It is one of the intolerable peculiarities of louts that they always lurk. I haven't seen *my* lout this morning. If you meet with him anywhere, give him a kick, and say I want him.'

Mr. Clare's opinion of his son's habits might have been expressed more politely as to form; but, as to substance, it happened, on that particular morning, to be perfectly correct. After leaving Magdalen, Frank had waited in the shrubbery, at a safe distance, on the chance that she might detach herself from her sister's company, and join him again. Mr. Vanstone's appearance immediately on Norah's departure, instead of encouraging him to show himself, had determined him on returning to the cottage. He walked back discontentedly; and so fell into his father's clutches, totally unprepared for the pending announcement, in that formidable quarter, of his departure for London.

In the mean time, Mr. Vanstone had communicated his news—in the first place, to Magdalen, and afterwards, on getting back to the house, to his wife and Miss Garth. He was too unobservant a man to notice that Magdalen looked unaccountably startled, and Miss Garth unaccountably relieved, by his announcement of Frank's good fortune. He talked on about it, quite unsuspiciously, until the luncheon-bell rang—and then, for the first time, he noticed Norah's absence. She sent a message down stairs, after they had assembled at the table, to say that a headache was keeping her in her own room. When Miss Garth went up shortly afterwards to communicate the news about Frank, Norah appeared, strangely enough, to feel very little relieved by hearing it. Mr. Francis Clare had gone away on a former occasion (she remarked) and had come back. He might come back again, and sooner than they any of them thought for. She said no more on the subject than this: she made no reference to what had taken place in the shrubbery. Her unconquerable reserve seemed to have strengthened its hold on her since the outburst of the morning. She met Magdalen, later in the day, as if nothing had happened: no formal reconciliation took place between them. It was one of Norah's peculiarities to shrink from all reconciliations

that were openly ratified, and to take her shy refuge in reconciliations that were silentiy implied. Magdalen saw plainly, in her look and manner, that she had made her first and last protest. Whether the motive was pride, or sullenness, or distrust of herself, or despair of doing good, the result was not to be mistaken—Norah had resolved on remaining passive for the future.

Later in the afternoon, Mr. Vanstone suggested a drive to his eldest daughter, as the best remedy for her headache. She readily consented to accompany her father; who, thereupon, proposed, as usual, that Magdalen should join them. Magdalen was nowhere to be found. For the second time that day, she had wandered into the grounds by herself. On this occasion, Miss Garth—who, after adopting Norah's opinions, had passed from the one extreme of overlooking Frank altogether, to the other extreme of believing him capable of planning an elopement at five minutes' notice—volunteered to set forth immediately, and do her best to find the missing young lady. After a prolonged absence, she returned unsuccessful—with the strongest persuasion in her own mind that Magdalen and Frank had secretly met one another somewhere, but without having discovered the smallest fragment of evidence to confirm her suspicions. By this time, the carriage was at the door, and Mr. Vanstone was unwilling to wait any longer. He and Norah drove away together; and Mrs. Vanstone and Miss Garth sat at home over their work.

In half an hour more, Magdalen composedly walked into the room. She was pale and depressed. She received Miss Garth's remonstrances with a weary inattention; explained carelessly that she had been wandering in the wood; took up some books, and put them down again; sighed impatiently; and went away upstairs to her own room.

'I think Magdalen is feeling the reaction, after yesterday,' said Mrs. Vanstone, quietly. 'It is just as we thought. Now the theatrical amusements are all over, she is fretting for more.'

Here was an opportunity of letting in the light of truth on Mrs. Vanstone's mind, which was too favourable to be missed. Miss Garth questioned her conscience, saw her chance, and took it on the spot.

'You forget,' she rejoined, 'that a certain neighbour of ours is going away to-morrow. Shall I tell you the truth? Magdalen is fretting over the departure of Francis Clare.'

Mrs. Vanstone looked up from her work, with a gende smiling surprise.

'Surely not?' she said. 'It is natural enough that Frank should be attracted by Magdalen—but I can't think that Magdalen returns the feeling. Frank is so very unlike her; so quiet and undemonstrative; so dull and helpless, poor fellow, in some things. He is handsome, I know; but he is so singularly unlike Magdalen, that I can't think it possible—I can't indeed.'

'My dear good lady!' cried Miss Garth, in great amazement; 'do you really suppose that people fall in love with each other on account of similarities in their characters? In the vast majority of cases, they do just the reverse. Men marry the very last women, and women the very last men, whom their friends would think it possible they could care about. Is there any phrase that is oftener on all our lips than "What can have made Mr. So-and-So marry that woman?"—or "How could Mrs. So-and-So throw herself away on that man?" Has all your experience of the world never yet shown you that girls take perverse fancies for men who are totally unworthy of them?'

'Very true,' said Mrs. Vanstone, composedly. 'I forgot that. Still it seems unaccountable, doesn't it?'

'Unaccountable, because it happens every day!' retorted Miss Garth, good-humouredly. 'I know a great many excellent people who reason against plain experience in the same way—who read the newspapers in the

morning, and deny in the evening that there is any romance for writers or painters to work upon in modern life. Seriously, Mrs. Vanstone, you may take my word for it—thanks to those wretched theatricals, Magdalen is going the way with Frank that a great many young ladies have gone before her. He is quite unworthy of her; he is, in almost every respect, her exact opposite—and, without knowing it herself, she has fallen in love with him on that very account. She is resolute and impetuous, clever and domineering; she is not one of those model women who want a man to look up to, and to protect them—her beau-ideal (though she may not think it herself) is a man she can henpeck. Well! one comfort is, there are far better men, even of that sort, to be had than Frank. It's a mercy he is going away, before we have more trouble with them, and before any serious mischief is done.'

'Poor Frank!' said Mrs. Vanstone, smiling compassionately. 'We have known him since he was in jackets, and Magdalen in short frocks. Don't let us give him up yet. He may do better this second time.'

Miss Garth looked up in astonishment.

'And suppose he does better?' she asked. 'What then?'

Mrs. Vanstone cut off a loose thread in her work, and laughed outright.

'My good friend,' she said, 'there is an old farm-yard proverb which warns us not to count our chickens before they are hatched. Let us wait a litde before we count ours.'

It was not easy to silence Miss Garth, when she was speaking under the influence of a strong conviction; but this reply closed her lips. She resumed her work; and looked, and thought, unutterable things.

Mrs. Vanstone's behaviour was certainly remarkable under the circumstances. Here, on one side, was a girl—with great personal attractions, with rare pecuniary prospects, with a social position which might have justified the best gentleman in the neighbourhood in making her an offer of marriage—perversely casting herself away on a penniless idle young fellow, who had failed at his first start in life, and who, even if he succeeded in his second attempt, must be for years to come in no position to marry a young lady of fortune on equal terms. And there, on the other side, was that girl's mother, by no means dismayed at the prospect of a connection which was, to say the least of it, far from desirable; by no means certain, judging her by her own words and looks, that a marriage between Mr. Vanstone's daughter and Mr. Clare's son might not prove to be as satisfactory a result of the intimacy between the two young people, as the parents on both sides could possibly wish for! It was perplexing in the extreme. It was almost as unintelligible as that past mystery—that forgotten mystery now—of the journey to London.

In the evening, Frank made his appearance, and announced that his father had mercilessly sentenced him to leave Combe-Raven by the parliamentary train* the next morning. He mentioned this circumstance with an air of sentimental resignation; and listened to Mr. Vanstone's boisterous rejoicings over his new prospects, with a mild and mute surprise. His gentle melancholy of look and manner greatly assisted his personal advantages. In his own effeminate way, he was more handsome than ever, that evening. His soft brown eyes wandered about the room with a melting tenderness; his hair was beautifully brushed; his delicate hands hung over the arms of his chair with/ a languid grace. He looked like a convalescent Apojla Never, on any previous occasion, had he practised more successfully the social art which he habitually cultivated—the art of casting himself on society in the character of a well-bred Incubus, and conferring an obligation on his fellow-creatures by allowing them to sit under him. It was undeniably a dull evening. All the talking fell to the share of Mr. Vanstone, and Miss Garth. Mrs. Vanstone was habitually silent; Norah kept herself obstinately in the background; Magdalen was quiet and undemonstrative beyond all former precedent. From first to last, she kept rigidly on her guard. The few meaning looks that she cast on Frank, flashed at him like lightning, and were gone before any one else

could see them. Even when she brought him his tea; and, when in doing so, her self-control gave way under the temptation which no woman can resist—the temptation of touching the man she loves—even then, she held the saucer so dexterously that it screened her hand. Frank's self-possession was far less steadily disciplined; it only lasted as long as he remained passive. When he rose to go; when he felt the warm clinging pressure of Magdalen's fingers round his hand, and the lock of her hair which she slipped into it at the same moment, he became awkward and confused. He might have betrayed Magdalen and betrayed himself, but for Mr. Vanstone, who innocently covered his retreat by following him out, and patting him on the shoulder all the way. 'God bless you, Frank!' cried the friendly voice that never had a harsh note in it for anybody. 'Your fortune's waiting for you. Go in, my boy—go in and win.'

'Yes,' said Frank. 'Thank you. It will be rather difficult to go in and win, at first. Of course, as you have always told me, a man's business is to conquer his difficulties, and not to talk about them. At the same time, I wish I didn't feel quite so loose as I do in my figures. It's discouraging to feel loose in one's figures.—Oh, yes; I'll write and tell you how I get on. I'm very much obliged by your kindness, and very sorry I couldn't succeed with the engineering. I think I should have liked engineering better than trade. It can't be helped now, can it? Thank you, again. Good-bye.'

So he drifted away into the misty commercial future—as aimless, as helpless, as gentlemanlike as ever.

Chapter IX

Three months passed. During that time, Frank remained in London; pursuing his new duties, and writing occasionally to report himself to Mr. Vanstone, as he had promised.

His letters were not enthusiastic on the subject of mercantile occupations. He described himself as being still painfully loose in his figures. He was also more firmly persuaded than ever—now when it was unfortunately too late—that he preferred engineering to trade. In spite of this conviction; in spite of headaches caused by sitting on a high stool and stooping over ledgers in unwholesome air; in spite of want of society, and hasty breakfasts, and bad dinners at chop-houses, his attendance at the office was regular, and his diligence at the desk unremitting. The head of the department in which he was working might be referred to if any corroboration of this statement was desired. Such was the general tenour of the letters; and Frank's correspondent, and Frank's father differed over them, as widely as usual. Mr. Vanstone accepted them, as proofs of the steady development of industrious principles in the writer. Mr. Clare took his own characteristically opposite view. 'These London men,' said the philosopher, 'are not to be trifled with by louts. They have got Frank by the scruff of the neck—he can't wriggle himself free—and he makes a merit of yielding to sheer necessity.'

The three months' interval of Frank's probation in London, passed less cheerfully than usual in the household at Combe-Raven.

As the summer came nearer and nearer, Mrs. Vanstone's spirits, in spite of her resolute efforts to control them, became more and more depressed. 'I do my best,' she said to Miss Garth; 'I set an example of cheerfulness to my husband and my children—but I dread July.' Norah's secret misgivings on her sister's account rendered her more than usually serious and uncommunicative, as the year advanced. Even Mr. Vanstone, when July drew nearer, lost something of his elasticity of spirit. He kept up appearances in his wife's presence—but, on all other occasions, there was now a perceptible shade of sadness in his look and manner. Magdalen was so changed, since Frank's departure, that she helped the general depression, instead of relieving it. All her movements had

grown languid; all her usual occupations were pursued with the same weary indifference; she spent hours alone in her own room; she lost her interest in being brightly and prettily dressed; her eyes were heavy, her nerves were irritable, her complexion was altered visibly for the worse—in one word, she had become an oppression and a weariness to herself and to all about her. Stoutly as Miss Garth contended with these growing domestic difficulties, her own spirits suffered in the effort. Her memory reverted, oftener and oftener, to the March morning when the master and mistress of the house had departed for London, and when the first serious change, for many a year past, had stolen over the family atmosphere. When was that atmosphere to be clear again? When were the clouds of change to pass off before the returning sunshine of past and happier times?

The spring and the early summer wore away. The dreaded month of July came, with its airless nights, its cloudless mornings, and its sultry days.

On the fifteenth of the month, an event happened which took every one but Norah by surprise. For the second time, without the slightest apparent reason—for the second time, without a word of warning beforehand—Frank suddenly reappeared at his father's cottage!

Mr. Clare's lips opened to hail his son's return, in the old character of the 'bad shilling;' and closed again without uttering a word. There was a portentous composure in Frank's manner which showed that he had other news to communicate than the news of his dismissal. He answered his father's sardonic look of inquiry, by at once explaining that a very important proposal for his future benefit had been made to him, that morning, at the office. His first idea had been to communicate the details in writing; but the partners had, on reflection, thought that the necessary decision might be more readily obtained by a personal interview with his father and his friends. He had laid aside the pen accordingly; and had resigned himself to the railway on the spot.

After this preliminary statement, Frank proceeded to describe the proposal which his employers had addressed to him, with every external appearance of viewing it in the light of an intolerable hardship.

The great firm in the City had obviously made a discovery in relation to their clerk, exactly similar to the discovery which had formerly forced itself on the engineer in relation to his pupil. The young man, as they politely phrased it, stood in need of some special stimulant to stir him up. His employers (acting under a sense of their obligation to the gentleman by whom Frank had been recommended) had considered the question carefully, and had decided that the one promising use to which they could put Mr. Francis Glare, was to send him forthwith into another quarter of the globe.

As a consequence of this decision, it was now therefore proposed, that he should enter the house of their correspondents in China; that he should remain there, familiarizing himself thoroughly on the spot with the tea-trade and the silk-trade for five years; and that he should return, at the expiration of this period, to the central establishment in London. If he made a fair use of his opportunities in China, he would come back, while still a young man, fit for a position of trust and emolument, and justified in looking forward, at no distant date, to a time when the House would assist him to start in business for himself. Such were the new prospects which—to adopt Mr. Clare's theory—now forced themselves on the ever-reluctant, ever-helpless, and ever-ungrateful Frank. There was no time to be lost. The final answer was to be at the office on 'Monday, the twentieth:' the correspondents in China were to be written to by the mail on that day; and Frank was to follow the letter by the next opportunity, or to resign his chance in favour of some more enterprising young man.

Mr. Clare's reception of this extraordinary news was startling in the extreme. The glorious prospect of his son's banishment to China appeared to turn his brain. The firm pedestal of his philosophy sank under him; the prejudices of society recovered their hold on his mind. He seized Frank by the arm, and actually accompanied him to Combe-Raven, in the amazing character of a visitor to the house!

‘Here I am with my lout,’ said Mr. Clare, before a word could be uttered by the astonished family. ‘Hear his story, all of you. It has reconciled me, for the first time in my life, to the anomaly of his existence.’ Frank ruefully narrated the Chinese proposal for the second time, and attempted to attach to it his own supplementary statement of objections and difficulties. His father stopped him at the first word, pointed peremptorily south-eastward (from Somersetshire to China); and said, without an instant’s hesitation: ‘Go!’ Mr. Vanstone, basking in golden visions of his young friend’s future, echoed that monosyllabic decision with all his heart. Mrs. Vanstone, Miss Garth, even Norah herself, spoke to the same purpose. Frank was petrified by an absolute unanimity of opinion which he had not anticipated; and Magdalen was caught, for once in her life, at the end of all her resources.

So far as practical results were concerned, the sitting of the family council began and ended with the general opinion that Frank must go. Mr. Vanstone’s faculties were so bewildered by the son’s sudden arrival, the father’s unexpected visit, and the news they both brought with them, that he petitioned for an adjournment, before the necessary arrangements connected with his young friend’s departure were considered in detail. ‘Suppose we all sleep upon it?’ he said. ‘To-morrow, our heads will feel a litde steadier; and to-morrow will be time enough to decide all uncertainties.’ This suggestion was readily adopted; and all further proceedings stood adjourned until the next day.

That next day was destined to decide more uncertainties than Mr. Vanstone dreamed of.

Early in the morning, after making tea by herself as usual, Miss Garth took her parasol, and strolled into the garden. She had slept ill; and ten minutes in the open air before the family assembled at breakfast, might help to compensate her, as she thought, for the loss of her night’s rest.

She wandered to the outermost boundary of the flower-garden, and then returned by another path, which led back, past the side of an ornamental summer-house commanding a view over the fields from a comer of the lawn. A slight noise—like, and yet not like, the chirmping of a bird—caught her ear, as she approached the summer-house. She stepped round to the entrance; looked in; and discovered Magdalen and Frank seated close together. To Miss Garth’s horror, Magdalen’s arm was unmistakably round Frank’s neck; and, worse still, the position of her face at the moment of discovery, showed beyond all doubt, that she had just been offering to the victim of Chinese commerce, the first and foremost of all the consolations which a woman can bestow on a man. In plainer words, she had just given Frank a kiss.

In the presence of such an emergency as now confronted her, Miss Garth felt instinctively that all ordinary phrases of reproof would be phrases thrown away.

‘I presume,’ she remarked, addressing Magdalen with the merciless self-possession of a middle-aged lady, unprovided for the occasion with any kissing remembrances of her own. ‘I presume (whatever excuses your effrontery may suggest) you will not deny that my duty compels me to mention what I have just seen to your father?’

‘I will save you the trouble,’ replied Magdalen, composedly. ‘I will mention it to him myself.’

With those words, she looked round at Frank, standing trebly helpless in a corner of the summer-house. ‘You shall hear what happens,’ she said, with her bright smile. ‘And so shall you,’ she added for Miss Garth’s especial benefit, as she sauntered past the governess, on her way back to the breakfast-table. The eyes of Miss Garth followed her indignantly; and Frank slipped out on his side, at that favourable opportunity.

Under these circumstances, there was but one course that any respectable woman could take—she could only shudder. Miss Garth registered her protest in that form, and returned to the house.

When breakfast was over, and when Mr. Vanstone's hand descended to his pocket in search of his cigar-case, Magdalen rose; looked significantly at Miss Garth; and followed her father into the hall.

'Papa,' she said, 'I want to speak to you this morning—in private.'

'Ay! ay!' returned Mr. Vanstone. 'What about, my dear?'

'About———' Magdalen hesitated, searched for a satisfactory form of expression, and found it. 'About business, papa,' she said.

Mr. Vanstone took his garden hat from the hall table—opened his eyes in mute perplexity—attempted to associate in his mind the two extravagantly dissimilar ideas of Magdalen and 'business'—failed—and led the way resignedly into the garden.

His daughter took his arm, and walked with him to a shady seat at a convenient distance from the house. She dusted the seat with her smart silk apron, before her father occupied it. Mr. Vanstone was not accustomed to such an extraordinary act of attention as this. He sat down, looking more puzzled than ever. Magdalen immediately placed herself on his knee, and rested her head comfortably on his shoulder.

'Am I heavy, papa?' she asked.

'Yes, my dear, you are,' said Mr. Vanstone—'but not too heavy for *me*. Stop on your perch, if you like it. Well? And what may this business happen to be?'

'It begins with a question.'

'Ah, indeed? That doesn't surprise me. Business with your sex, my dear, always begins with questions. Go on.'

'Papa! do you ever intend allowing me to be married?'

Mr. Vanstone's eyes opened wider and wider. The question, to use his own phrase, completely staggered him.

'This is business with a vengeance!' he said. 'Why, Magdalen! what have you got in that harum-scarum head of yours now?'

'I don't exactly know, papa. Will you answer my question?'

'I will if I can, my dear; you rather stagger me. Well, I don't know. Yes; I suppose I must let you be married, one of these days—if we can find a good husband for you. How hot your face is! Lift it up, and let the air blow over it. You won't? Well—have your own way. If talking of business means tickling your cheek against my whisker, I've nothing to say against it. Go on, my dear. What's the next question? Come to the point!'

She was far too genuine a woman to do anything of the sort. She skirted round the point, and calculated her distance to the nicety of a hair's breadth.

'We were all very much surprised, yesterday—were we not, papa? Frank is wonderfully lucky, isn't he?'

'He's the luckiest dog I ever came across,' said Mr. Vanstone. 'But what has that got to do with this business of yours? I dare say you see your way, Magdalen. Hang me, if I can see mine!'

She skirted a little nearer.

'I suppose he will make his fortune in China?' she said. 'It's a long way off, isn't it? Did you observe, papa, that

Frank looked sadly out of spirits yesterday?'

'I was so surprised by the news,' said Mr. Vanstone, 'and so staggered by the sight of old Clare's sharp nose in my house, that I didn't much notice. Now you remind me of it—yes. I don't think Frank took kindly to his own good luck; not kindly at all.'

'Do you wonder at that, papa?'

'Yes, my dear; I do, rather.'

'Don't you think it's hard to be sent away for five years, to make your fortune among hateful savages, and lose sight of your friends at home for all that long time? Don't you think Frank will miss *us*, sadly? Don't you, papa? —don't you?'

'Gently, Magdalen! I'm a little too old for those long arms of yours to throtde me in fun.—You're right, my love. Nothing in this world, without a drawback. Frank *will* miss his friends in England: there's no denying that.'

'You always liked Frank. And Frank always liked you.'

'Yes, yes—a good fellow; a quiet, good fellow. Frank and I have always got on smoothly together.'

'You have got on like father and son, haven't you?'

'Certainly, my dear.'

'Perhaps you will think it harder on him when he has gone, than you think it now?'

'Likely enough, Magdalen; I don't say no.'

'Perhaps you will wish he had stopped in England? Why shouldn't he stop in England, and do as well as if he went to China?'

'My dear! he has no prospects in England. I wish he had, for his own sake. I wish the lad well, with all my heart.'

'May I wish him well, too, papa—with all *my* heart?'

'Certainly, my love—your old playfellow—why not? What's the matter? God bless my soul, what is the girl crying about? One would think Frank was transported for life. You goose! You know, as well as I do, he is going to China to make his fortune.'

'He doesn't want to make his fortune—he might do much better.'

'The deuce he might! How—I should like to know?'

'I'm afraid to tell you. I'm afraid you'll laugh at me. Will you promise not to laugh at me?'

'Anything to please you, my dear. Yes: I promise. Now then, out with it! How might Frank do better?'

'He might marry Me.'

If the summer-scene which then spread before Mr. Vanstone's eyes, had suddenly changed to a dreary winter view—if the trees had lost all their leaves, and the green fields had turned white with snow, in an instant—his

face could hardly have expressed greater amazement than it displayed, when his daughter's faltering voice spoke those four last words. He tried to look at her—but she steadily refused him the opportunity: she kept her face hidden over his shoulder. Was she in earnest? His cheek, still wet with her tears, answered for her. There was a long pause of silence; she waited—with unaccustomed patience, she waited for him to speak. He roused himself, and spoke these words only:—'You surprise me, Magdalen; you surprise me, more than I can say.'

At the altered tone of his voice—altered to a quiet fatherly seriousness—Magdalen's arms clung round him closer than before.

'Have I disappointed you, papa?' she asked faintly. 'Don't say I have disappointed you! Who am I to tell my secret to, if not to you? Don't let him go—don't! don't! You will break his heart. He is afraid to tell his father; he is even afraid *you* might be angry with him. There is nobody to speak for us, except—except me. Oh, don't let him go! Don't for his sake—' she whispered the next words in a kiss—'Don't for Mine!'

Her father's kind face saddened; he sighed, and patted her fair head tenderly. 'Hush, my love,' he said, almost in a whisper; 'hush!' She little knew what a revelation every word, every action that escaped her, now opened before him. She had made him her grown-up playfellow, from her childhood to that day. She had romped with him in her frocks, she had gone on romping with him in her gowns. He had never been long enough separated from her to have the external changes in his daughter forced on his attention. His artless fatherly experience of her, had taught him that she was a taller child in later years—and had taught him little more. And now, in one breathless instant, the conviction that she was a woman rushed over his mind. He felt it in the trouble of her bosom pressed against his; in the nervous thrill of her arms clasped around his neck. The Magdalen of his innocent experience, a woman—with the master-passion of her sex in possession of her heart already!

'Have you thought long of this, my dear?' he asked, as soon as he could speak composedly. 'Are you sure ———?'

She answered the question before he could finish it.

'Sure I love him?' she said. 'Oh what words can say Yes for me as I want to say it! I love him !' Her voice faltered softly; and her answer ended in a sigh.

'You are very young. You and Frank, my love, are both very young.'

She raised her head from his shoulder for the first time. The thought and its expression flashed from her at the same moment.

'Are we much younger than you and mamma were?' she asked, smiling through her tears.

She tried to lay her head back in its old position; but as she spoke those words, her father caught her round the waist—forced her, before she was aware of it, to look him in the face—and kissed her, with a sudden outburst of tenderness which brought the tears thronging back thickly into her eyes. 'Not much younger, my child,' he said, in low, broken tones—'not much younger than your mother and I were.' He put her away from him, and rose from the seat, and turned his head aside quickly. 'Wait here, and compose yourself; I will go indoors and speak to your mother.' His voice trembled over those parting words: and he left her without once looking round again.

She waited—waited a weary time; and he never came back. At last, her growing anxiety urged her to follow him into the house. A new timidity throbbed in her heart, as she doubtingly approached the door. Never had she seen the depths of her father's simple nature, stirred as they had been stirred by her confession. She almost dreaded her next meeting with him. She wandered softly to and fro in the hall, with a shyness unaccountable to herself;

with a terror of being discovered and spoken to by her sister or Miss Garth, which made her nervously susceptible to the slightest noises in the house. The door of the morning-room opened, while her back was turned towards it. She started violently, as she looked round and saw her father in the hall: her heart beat faster and faster, and she felt herself turning pale. A second look at him, as he came nearer, reassured her. He was composed again, though not so cheerful as usual. She noticed that he advanced and spoke to her with a forbearing gentleness, which was more like his manner to her mother, than his ordinary manner to herself.

'Go in, my love,' he said, opening the door for her which he had just closed. 'Tell your mother all you have told me—and more, if you have more to say. She is better prepared for you than I was. We will take today to think of it, Magdalen; and to-morrow you shall know, and Frank shall know, what we decide.'

Her eyes brightened, as they looked into his face, and saw the decision there already, with the double penetration of her womanhood and her love. Happy, and beautiful in her happiness, she put his hand to her lips, and went, without hesitation, into the morning-room. There, her father's words had smoothed the way for her: there, the first shock of the surprise was past and over, and only the pleasure of it remained. Her mother had been her age once; her mother would know how fond she was of Frank, So the coming interview was anticipated in her thoughts; and—except that there was an unaccountable appearance of restraint in Mrs. Vanstone's first reception of her—was anticipated aright. After a little, the mother's questions came more and more unreservedly from the sweet, unforgotten experience of the mother's heart. She lived again through her own young days of hope and love in Magdalen's replies.

The next morning, the all-important decision was announced in words. Mr. Vanstone took his daughter up-stairs into her mother's room, and there placed before her the result of the yesterday's consultation, and of the night's reflection which had followed it. He spoke with perfect kindness and self-possession of manner—but in fewer and more serious words than usual; and he held his wife's hand tenderly in his own, all through the interview.

He informed Magdalen that neither he nor her mother felt themselves justified in blaming her attachment to Frank. It had been, in part perhaps, the natural consequence of her childish familiarity with him; in part, also, the result of the closer intimacy between them which the theatrical entertainment had necessarily produced. At the same time, it was now the duty of her parents to put that attachment, on both sides, to a proper test—for her sake, because her happy future was their dearest care; for Frank's sake, because they were bound to give him the opportunity of showing himself worthy of the trust confided in him. They were both conscious of being strongly prejudiced in Frank's favour. His father's eccentric conduct had made the lad the object of their compassion and their care from his earliest years. He (and his younger brothers) had almost filled the places to them of those other children of their own whom they had lost. Although they firmly believed their good opinion of Frank to be well founded—still, in the interest of their daughter's happiness, it was necessary to put that opinion firmly to the proof, by fixing certain conditions, and by interposing a year of delay between the contemplated marriage and the present time.

During that year, Frank was to remain at the office in London; his employers being informed beforehand that family circumstances prevented his accepting their offer of employment in China. He was to consider this concession as a recognition of the attachment between Magdalen and himself, on certain terms only. If, during the year of probation, he failed to justify the confidence placed in him—a confidence which had led Mr. Vanstone to take unreservedly upon himself the whole responsibility of Frank's future prospects—the marriage scheme was to be considered, from that moment, as at an end. If, on the other hand, the result to which Mr. Vanstone confidently looked forward, really occurred—if Frank's probationary year proved his claim to the most precious trust that could be placed in his hands—then, Magdalen herself should reward him with all that a woman can bestow; and the future which his present employers had placed before him as the result of a five

years' residence in China, should be realized in one year's time, by the dowry of his young wife.

As her father drew that picture of the future, the outburst of Magdalen's gratitude could no longer be restrained. She was deeply touched—she spoke from her inmost heart. Mr. Vanstone waited until his daughter and his wife were composed again; and then added the last words of explanation which were now left for him to speak.

'You understand, my love,' he said, 'that I am not anticipating Frank's living in idleness on his wife's means? My plan for him is that he should still profit by the interest which his present employers take in him. Their knowledge of affairs in the City, will soon place a good partnership at his disposed—and you will give him the money to buy it out of hand. I shall limit the sum, my dear, to half your fortune; and the other half I shall have setded upon yourself. We shall all be alive and hearty, I hope'—he looked tenderly at his wife as he said those words—'all alive and hearty at the year's end. But if I am gone, Magdalen, it will make no difference. My will—made long before I ever thought of having a son-in-law—divides my fortune into two equal parts. One part goes to your mother; and the other part is fairly divided between my children. You will have your share on your wedding-day (and Norah will have hers when she marries) from my own hand, if I live; and under my will if I die. There! there! no gloomy faces,' he said, with a momentary return of his every-day good spirits. 'Your mother and I mean to live and see Frank a great merchant. I shall leave you, my dear, to enlighten the son on our new projects, while I walk over to the cottage '

He stopped; his eyebrows contracted a litde; and he looked aside hesitatingly at Mrs. Vanstone.

'What must you do at the cottage, papa?' asked Magdalen, after having vainly waited for him to finish the sentence of his own accord.

'I must consult Frank's father,' he replied. 'We must not forget that Mr. Clare's consent is still wanting to settle this matter. And as time presses, and we don't know what difficulties he may not raise, the sooner I see him the better.'

He gave that answer in low, altered tones; and rose from his chair in a half-reluctant, half-resigned manner, which Magdalen observed with secret alarm.

She glanced inquiringly at her mother. To all appearance, Mrs. Vanstone had been alarmed by the change in him also. She looked anxious and uneasy; she turned her face away on the sofa pillow—turned it suddenly, as if she was in pain.

'Are you not well, mamma?' asked Magdalen.

'Quite well, my love,' said Mrs. Vanstone, shortly and sharply, without turning round. 'Leave me a little—I only want rest.'

Magdalen went out with her father.

'Papa!' she whispered anxiously, as they descended the stairs. 'You don't think Mr. Clare will say No?'

'I can't tell beforehand,' answered Mr. Vanstone. 'I hope he will say Yes.'

'There is no reason why he should say anything else—is there?'

She put the question faintly, while he was getting his hat and stick; and he did not appear to hear her. Doubting whether she should repeat it or not, she accompanied him as far as the garden, on his way to Mr. Clare's cottage. He stopped her on the lawn, and sent her back to the house.

‘You have nothing on your head, my dear,’ he said. ‘If you want to be in the garden, don’t forget how hot the sun is—don’t come out without your hat.’

He walked on towards the cottage.

She waited a moment, and looked after him. She missed the customary flourish of his stick; she saw his little Scotch terrier, who had run out at his heels, barking and capering about him unnoticed. He was out of spirits: he was strangely out of spirits. What did it mean?

Chapter X

On returning to the house, Magdalen felt her shoulder suddenly touched from behind, as she crossed the hall. She turned, and confronted her sister. Before she could ask any questions, Norah confusedly addressed her, in these words: ‘I beg your pardon; I beg you to forgive me.’

Magdalen looked at her sister in astonishment. All memory, on her side, of the sharp words which had passed between them in the shrubbery, was lost in the new interests that now absorbed her; lost as completely as if the angry interview had never taken place. ‘Forgive you!’ she repeated, amazedly. ‘What for?’

‘I have heard of your new prospects,’ pursued Norah, speaking with a mechanical submissiveness of manner which seemed almost ungracious; ‘I wished to set things right between us; I wished to say I was sorry for what happened. Will you forget it? Will you forget and forgive what happened in the shrubbery?’ She tried to proceed; but her inveterate reserve—or, perhaps, her obstinate reliance on her own opinions—silenced her at those last words. Her face clouded over on a sudden. Before her sister could answer her, she turned away abruptly and ran upstairs.

The door of the library opened, before Magdalen could follow her; and Miss Garth advanced to express the sentiments proper to the occasion.

They were not the mechanically-submissive sentiments which Magdalen had just heard. Norah had struggled against her rooted distrust of Frank, in deference to the unanswerable decision of both her parents in his favour; and had suppressed the open expression of her antipathy, though the feeling itself remained unconquered. Miss Garth had made no such concession to the master and mistress of the house. She had hitherto held the position of a high authority on all domestic questions; and she flatly declined to get off her pedestal in deference to any change in the family circumstances, no matter how amazing or how unexpected that change might be.

‘Pray accept my congratulations,’ said Miss Garth, bristling all over with implied objections to Frank—‘my congratulations, *and* my apologies. When I caught you kissing Mr. Francis Clare in the summer-house, I had no idea you were engaged in carrying out the intentions of your parents. I offer no opinion on the subject. I merely regret my own accidental appearance in the character of an Obstacle to the course of true love—which appears to run smooth in summer-houses, whatever Shakespeare may say to the contrary. Consider me for the future, if you please, as an Obstacle removed. May you be happy!’ Miss Garth’s lips closed on that last sentence like a trap; and Miss Garth’s eyes looked ominously prophetic into the matrimonial future.

If Magdalen’s anxieties had not been far too serious to allow her the customary free use of her tongue, she would have been ready on the instant, with an appropriately satirical answer. As it was, Miss Garth simply irritated her. ‘Pooh!’ she said—and ran up-stairs to her sister’s room.

She knocked at the door, and there was no answer. She tried the door, and it resisted her from the inside. The sullen unmanageable Norah was locked in.

Under other circumstances, Magdalen would not have been satisfied with knocking—she would have called through the door loudly and more loudly, till the house was disturbed, and she had carried her point. But the doubts and fears of the morning had unnerved her already. She went down-stairs again softly, and took her hat from the stand in the hall. 'He told me to put my hat on,' she said to herself, with a meek filial docility which was totally out of her character.

She went into the garden, on the shrubbery side; and waited there to catch the first sight of her father on his return. Half an hour passed; forty minutes passed—and then his voice reached her from among the distant trees. 'Come in to heel!' she heard him call out loudly to the dog. Her face turned pale. 'He's angry with Snap!' she exclaimed to herself in a whisper. The next minute he appeared in view; walking rapidly, with his head down, and Snap at his heels in disgrace. The sudden excess of her alarm as she observed those ominous signs of something wrong rallied her natural energy, and determined her desperately on knowing the worst.

She walked straight forward to meet her father.

'Your face tells your news,' she said faindy. 'Mr. Clare has been as heartless as usual—Mr. Clare has said, No?'

Her father turned on her with a sudden severity, so entirely unparalleled in her experience of him, that she started back in downright terror.

'Magdalen!' he said; 'whenever you speak of my old friend and neighbour again, bear this in mind. Mr. Clare has just laid me under an obligation which I shall remember gratefully to the end of my life.'

He stopped suddenly, after saying those remarkable words. Seeing that he had startled her, his natural kindness prompted him instantly to soften the reproof, and to end the suspense from which she was plainly suffering. 'Give me a kiss, my love,' he resumed; 'and I'll tell you in return that Mr. Clare has said—Yes.'

She attempted to thank him; but the sudden luxury of relief was too much for her. She could only cling round his neck in silence. He felt her trembling from head to foot, and said a few words to calm her. At the altered tones of his master's voice, Snap's meek tail reappeared fiercely from between his legs; and Snap's lungs modestly tested his position with a brief experimental bark. The dog's quaintly appropriate assertion of himself on his old footing, was the interruption of all others which was best fitted to restore Magdalen to herself. She caught the shaggy little terrier up in her arms, and kissed *him* next. 'You darling,' she exclaimed, 'you're almost as glad as I am!' She turned again to her father, with a look of tender reproach. 'You frightened me, papa,' she said. 'You were so unlike yourself.'

'I shall be right again, to-morrow, my dear, I am a litde upset to-day.'

'Not by me?'

'No, no.'

'By something you have heard at Mr. Clare's?'

'Yes—nothing you need alarm yourself about; nothing that won't wear off by to-morrow. Let me go now, my dear, I have a letter to write; and I want to speak to your mother.'

He left her, and went on to the house. Magdalen lingered a litde on the lawn, to feel all the happiness of her new

sensations—then turned away towards the shrubbery, to enjoy the higher luxury of communicating them. The dog followed her. She whisded, and clapped her hands. ‘Find him!’ she said, with beaming eyes. ‘Find Frank!’ Snap scampered into the shrubbery, with a bloodthirsty snarl at starting. Perhaps he had mistaken his young mistress, and considered himself her emissary in search of a rat?

Meanwhile Mr. Vanstone entered the house. He met his wife, slowly descending the stairs, and advanced to give her his arm. ‘How has it ended?’ she asked anxiously, as he le<i her to the sofa.

‘Happily—as we hoped it would,’ answered her husband. ‘My old friend has justified my opinion of him.’

‘Thank God!’ said Mrs. Vanstone, fervently. ‘Did you feel it, love?’ she asked, as her husband arranged the sofa pillows—‘did you feel it as painfully as I feared you would?’

‘I had a duty to do, my dear—and I did it.’

After replying in those terms, he hesitated. Apparendy, he had something more to say—something, perhaps, on the subject of that passing uneasiness of mind, which had been produced by his interview with Mr. Clare, and which Magdalen’s questions had obliged him to acknowledge. A look at his wife decided his doubts in the negative. He only asked if she felt comfortable; and then turned away to leave the room.

‘Must you go?’ she asked.

‘I have a letter to write, my dear.’

‘Anything about Frank?’

‘No: to-morrow will do for that. A letter to Mr. Pendril. I want him here immediately.’

‘Business, I suppose?’

‘Yes, my dear—business.’

He went out, and shut himself into the little front room, close to the hall-door, which was called his study. By nature and habit the most procrastinating of letter-writers, he now inconsistently opened his desk and took up the pen without a moment’s delay. His letter was long enough to occupy three pages of note-paper; it was written with a readiness of expression and a rapidity of hand which seldom characterized his proceedings when engaged over his ordinary correspondence. He wrote the address as follows, ‘Immediate:—William Pendril, Esq., Serle Street, Lincoln’s Inn, London’—then pushed the letter away from him, and sat at the table, drawing lines on the blotting-paper with his pen, lost in thought. ‘No,’ he said to himself; ‘I can do nothing more till Pendril comes.’ He rose; his face brightened as he put the stamp on the envelope. The writing of the letter had sensibly relieved him, and his whole bearing showed it as he left the room.

On the door-step, he found Norah and Miss Garth, setting forth together for a walk.

‘Which way are you going?’ he asked. ‘Anywhere near the post-office? I wish you would post this letter for me, Norah. It is very important—so important, that I hardly like to trust it to Thomas as usual.’

Norah at once took charge of the letter.

‘If you look, my dear,’ continued her father, ‘you will see that I am writing to Mr. Pendril. I expect him here to-morrow afternoon. Will you give the necessary directions, Miss Garth? Mr. Pendril will sleep here to-morrow night, and stay over Sunday.—Wait a minute! To-day is Friday. Surely I had an engagement for Saturday

afternoon?' He consulted his pocket-book, and read over one of the entries, with a look of annoyance. 'Grailsea Mill, three o'clock, Saturday. Just the time when Pendril will be here; and I *must* be at home to see him. How can I manage it? Monday will be too late for my business at Grailsea. I'll go to-day, instead; and take my chance of catching the miller at his dinnertime.' He looked at his watch. 'No time for driving; I must do it by railway. If I go at once, I shall catch the down train at our station, and get on to Grailsea. Take care of the letter, Norah. I won't keep dinner waiting; if the return train doesn't suit, I'll borrow a gig, and get back in that way.'

As he took up his hat, Magdalen appeared at the door, returning from her interview with Frank. The hurry of her father's movements attracted her attention; and she asked him where he was going.

'To Grailsea,' replied Mr. Vanstone. 'Your business, Miss Magdalen, has got in the way of mine—and mine must give way to it.'

He spoke those parting words in his old hearty manner; and left them, with the old characteristic flourish of his trusty stick.

'My business!' said Magdalen. 'I thought my business was done.'

Miss Garth pointed significantly to the letter in Norah's hand. 'Your business, beyond all doubt,' she said. 'Mr. Pendril is coming to-morrow; and Mr. Vanstone seems remarkably anxious about it. Law, and its attendant troubles already! Governesses who look in at summer-house doors are not the only obstacles to the course of true love. Parchment is sometimes an obstacle. I hope you may find Parchment as pliable as I am—I wish you well through it. Now, Norah!'

Miss Garth's second shaft struck as harmless as the first. Magdalen had returned to the house, a little vexed; her interview with Frank having been interrupted by a messenger from Mr. Clare, sent to summon the son into the father's presence. Although it had been agreed at the private interview between Mr. Vanstone and Mr. Clare, that the questions discussed that morning should not be communicated to the children, until the year of probation was at an end—and although, under these circumstances, Mr. Clare had nothing to tell Frank which Magdalen could not communicate to him much more agreeably—the philosopher was not the less resolved on personally informing his son of the parental concession which rescued him from Chinese exile. The result was a sudden summons to the cottage, which startled Magdalen, but which did not appear to take Frank by surprise. His filial experience penetrated the mystery of Mr. Clare's motives easily enough. 'When my father's in spirits,' he said, sulkily, 'he likes to bully me about my good luck. This message means that he's going to bully me now.'

'Don't go,' suggested Magdalen.

'I must,' rejoined Frank. 'I shall never hear the last of it, if I don't. He's primed and loaded, and he means to go off. He went off, once, when the engineer took me; he went off, twice, when the office in the City took me; and he's going off, thrice, now *you've* taken me. If it wasn't for you, I should wish I had never been born. Yes; your father's been kind to me, I know—and I should have gone to China, if it hadn't been for him. I'm sure I'm very much obliged. Of course, we have no right to expect anything else—still, it's discouraging to keep us waiting a year, isn't it?'

Magdalen stopped his mouth by a summary process, to which even Frank submitted gratefully. At the same time, she did not forget to set down his discontent to the right side. 'How fond he is of me!' she thought. 'A year's waiting is quite a hardship to him.' She returned to the house, secretly regretting that she had not heard more of Frank's complimentary complaints. Miss Garth's elaborate satire, addressed to her while she was in this frame of mind, was a purely gratuitous waste of Miss Garth's breath. What did Magdalen care for satire? What

do Youth and Love ever care for except themselves? She never even said as much as ‘Pooh!’ this time. She laid aside her hat in serene silence, and sauntered languidly into the morning-room to keep her mother company. She lunched on dire forebodings of a quarrel between Frank and his father, with accidental interruptions in the shape of cold chicken and cheese-cakes. She trifled away half an hour at the piano; and played, in that time, selections from the Songs of Mendelssohn, the Mazurkas of Chopin, the Operas of Verdi, and the Sonatas of Mozart—all of whom had combined together on this occasion, and produced one immortal work, entided ‘Frank.’ She closed the piano and went up to her room, to dream away the hours luxuriously in visions of her married future. The green shutters were closed, the easy-chair was pushed in front of the glass, the maid was summoned as usual; and the comb assisted the mistress’s reflections, through the medium of the mistress’s hair, till heat and idleness asserted their narcotic influences together, and Magdalen fell asleep.

It was past three o’clock when she woke. On going down stairs again she found her mother, Norah, and Miss Garth all sitting together enjoying the shade and the coolness under the open portico in front of the house.

Norah had the railway time-table in her hand. They had been discussing the chances of Mr. Vanstone’s catching the return train, and getting back in good time. That topic had led them, next, to his business errand at Grail-sea —an errand of kindness, as usual; undertaken for the benefit of the miller, who had been his old farm-servant, and who was now hard pressed by serious pecuniary difficulties. From this they had glided insensibly into a subject often repeated among them, and never exhausted by repetition—the praise of Mr. Vanstone himself. Each one of the three had some experience of her own to relate of his simple, generous nature. The conversation seemed to be almost painfully interesting to his wife. She was too near the time of her trial now, not to feel nervously sensitive to the one subject which always held the foremost place in her heart. Her eyes overflowed as Magdalen joined the little group under the portico; her frail hand trembled, as it signed to her youngest daughter to take the vacant chair by her side. ‘We were talking of your father,’ she said, softly. ‘Oh, my love, if your married life is only as happy———’ Her voice failed her; she put her handkerchief hurriedly over her face, and rested her head on Magdalen’s shoulder. Norah looked appealingly to Miss Garth; who at once led the conversation back to the more trivial subject of Mr. Vanstone’s return. ‘We have , all been wondering,’ she said, with a significant look at Magdalen, ‘whether your father will leave Grailsea in time to catch the train—or whether he will miss it, and be obliged to drive back. What do you say?’

‘I say, papa will miss the train,’ replied Magdalen, taking Miss Garth’s hint with her customary quickness. ‘The last thing he attends to at Grailsea, will be the business that brings him there. Whenever he has business to do, he always puts it off to the last moment, doesn’t he, mamma?’

The question roused her mother exactly as Magdalen had intended it should. ‘Not when his errand is an errand of kindness,’ said Mrs. Vanstone. ‘He has gone to help the miller, in a very pressing difficulty———’

‘And don’t you know what he’ll do?’ persisted Magdalen. ‘He’ll romp with the miller’s children, and gossip with the mother, and hob-and-nob with the father. At the last moment, when he has got five minutes left to catch the train, he’ll say, “Let’s go into the counting-house, and look at the books.” He’ll find the books dreadfully complicated; he’ll suggest sending for an accountant; he’ll settle the business off-hand, by lending the money in the mean time; he’ll jog back comfortably in the miller’s gig; and he’ll tell us all how pleasant the lanes were in the cool of the evening.’

The little character-sketch which these words drew, was too faithful a likeness not to be recognized. Mrs. Vanstone showed her appreciation of it by a smile. ‘When your father returns,’ she said, ‘we will put your account of his proceedings to the test. I think,’ she continued, rising languidly from her chair, ‘I had better go in-doors again now, and rest on the sofa till he comes back.’

The little group under the portico broke up. Magdalen slipped away into the garden to hear Frank's account of the interview with his father. The other three ladies entered the house together. When Mrs. Vanstone was comfortably established on the sofa, Norah and Miss Garth left her to repose, and withdrew to the library to look over the last parcel of books from London.

It was a quiet, cloudless summer's day. The heat was tempered by a light western breeze; the voices of labourers at work in a field near, reached the house cheerfully; the clock-bell of the village church as it struck the quarters, floated down the wind with a clearer ring, a louder melody than usual. Sweet odours from field and flower-garden, stealing in at the open windows, filled the house with their fragrance; and the birds in Norah's aviary up-stairs, sang the song of their happiness exultingly in the sun.

As the church clock struck the quarter past four, the morning-room door opened; and Mrs. Vanstone crossed the hall alone. She had tried vainly to compose herself. She was too restless to lie still, and sleep. For a moment, she directed her steps towards the portico—then turned, and looked about her, doubtful where to go, or what to do next. While she was still hesitating, the half-open door of her husband's study attracted her attention. The room seemed to be in sad confusion. Drawers were left open; coats and hats, account-books and papers, pipes and fishing-rods were all scattered about together. She went in, and pushed the door to—but so gently that she still left it ajar. 'It will amuse me to put his room to rights,' she thought to herself. 'I should like to do something for him, before I am down on my bed helpless.' She began to arrange his drawers; and found his banker's book lying open in one of them. 'My poor dear, how careless he is! The servants might have seen all his affairs, if I had not happened to have looked in.' She set the drawers right; and then turned to the multifarious fitter on a side table. A litde old-fashioned music-book appeared among the scattered papers, with her name written in it, in faded ink. She blushed like a young girl in the first happiness of the discovery. 'How good he is to me! He remembers my poor old music-book, and keeps it for my sake.' As she sat down by the table and opened the book, the bygone time came back to her in all its tenderness. The clock struck the half-hour, struck the three-quarters—and still she sat there, with the music-book on her lap, dreaming happily over the old songs; thinking gratefully of the golden days when his hand had turned the pages for her, when his voice had whispered the words which no woman's memory ever forgets.

Norah roused herself from the volume she was reading, and glanced at the clock on the library mantelpiece.

'If papa comes back by railway,' she said, 'he will be here in ten minutes.'

Miss Garth started, and looked up drowsily from the book which was just dropping out of her hand.

'I don't think he will come by train,' she replied. 'He will jog back—as Magdalen flippantly expressed it—in the miller's gig.'

As she said the words, there was a knock at the library door. The footman appeared, and addressed himself to Miss Garth.

'A person wishes to see you, ma'am.'

'Who is it?'

'I don't know, ma'am. A stranger to me—a respectablelooking man—and he said he particularly wished to see you.'

Miss Garth went out into the hall. The footman closed the library door after her; and withdrew down the kitchen stairs.

The man stood just inside the door, on the mat. His eyes wandered, his face was pale—he looked ill; he looked frightened. He trifled nervously with his cap, and shifted it backwards and forwards, from one hand to the other.

‘You wanted to see me?’ said Miss Garth.

‘I beg your pardon ma’am.—You are not Mrs. Vanstone, are you?’

‘Certainly not. I am Miss Garth. Why do you ask the question?’

‘I am employed in the clerk’s office at Grailsea Station———’

‘Yes?’

‘I am sent here———’

He stopped again. His wandering eyes looked down at the mat, and his restless hands wrung his cap harder and harder. He moistened his dry lips, and tried once more

‘I am sent here on a very serious errand.’

‘Serious to *me?’*

‘Serious to all in this house.’

Miss Garth took one step nearer to him—took one steady look at his face. She turned cold in the summer heat. ‘Stop!’ she said, with a sudden distrust, and glanced aside anxiously at the door of the morning-room. It was safely closed. ‘Tell me the worst; and don’t speak loud. There has been an accident. Where?’

‘On the railway. Close to Grailsea Station.’

‘The up-train, to London?’

‘No: the down-train at one-fifty———’

‘God Almighty help us! The train Mr. Vanstone travelled by to Grailsea?’

‘The same. I was sent here by the up-train: the line was just cleared in time for it. They wouldn’t write—they said I must see ‘Miss Garth,’ and tell her. There are seven passengers badly hurt; and two———’

The next word failed on his lips; he raised his hand in the dead silence. With eyes that opened wide in horror, he raised his hand and pointed over Miss Garth’s shoulder.

She turned a little, and looked back.

Face to face with her, on the threshold of the study door, stood the mistress of the house. She held her old music-book clutched fast mechanically in both hands. She stood, the spectre of herself. With a dreadful vacancy in her eyes, with a dreadful stillness in her voice, she repeated the man’s last words:

‘Seven passengers badly hurt; and two———’

Her tortured fingers relaxed their hold; the book dropped from them; she sank forward heavily. Miss Garth caught her before she fell—caught her, and turned upon the man, with the wife’s swooning body in her arms, to hear the husband’s fate.

‘The harm is done,’ she said: ‘you may speak out. Is he wounded, or dead?’

‘Dead.’

Chapter XI

The sun sank lower; the western breeze floated cool and fresh into the house. As the evening advanced, the cheerful ring of the village clock came nearer and nearer. Field and flower-garden felt the influence of the hour, and shed their sweetest fragrance. The birds in Norah’s aviary sunned themselves in the evening stillness, and sang their farewell gratitude to the dying day.

Staggered in its progress for a time only, the pitiless routine of the house went horribly on its daily way. The panic-stricken servants took their blind refuge in the duties proper to the hour. The footman softly laid the table for dinner. The maid sat waiting in senseless doubt, with the hot-water jugs for the bedrooms ranged near her in their customary row. The gardener, who had been ordered to come to his master, with vouchers for money that he had paid in excess of his instructions, said his character was dear to him, and left the vouchers at his appointed time. Custom that never yields, and Death that never spares, met on the wreck of human happiness—and Death gave way.

Heavily the thunder-clouds of Affliction had gathered over the house—heavily, but not at their darkest yet. At five, that evening, the shock of the calamity had struck its blow. Before another hour had passed, the disclosure of the husband’s sudden death was followed by the suspense of the wife’s mortal peril. She lay helpless on her widowed bed; her own life, and the life of her unborn child, trembling in the balance.

But one mind still held possession of its resources—but one guiding spirit now moved helpfully in the house of mourning.

If Miss Garth’s early days had been passed as calmly and as happily as her later life at Combe-Raven, she might have sunk under the cruel necessities of the time. But the governess’s youth had been tried in the ordeal of family affliction; and she met her terrible duties with the steady courage of a woman who had learnt to suffer. Alone, she had faced the trial of telling the daughters that they were fatherless. Alone, she now struggled to sustain them, when the dreadful certainty of their bereavement was at last impressed on their minds.

Her least anxiety was for the elder sister. The agony of Norah’s grief had forced its way outward to the natural relief of tears. It was not so with Magdalen. Tearless and speechless, she sat in the room where the revelation of her father’s death had first reached her; her face, unnaturally petrified by the sterile sorrow of old age—a white changeless blank, fearful to look at. Nothing roused, nothing melted her. She only said ‘Don’t speak to me; don’t touch me. Let me bear it by myself—and fell silent again. The first great grief which had darkened the sisters’ lives, had, as it seemed, changed their every-day characters already.

The twilight fell, and faded; and the summer night came brightly. As the first carefully shaded light was kindled in the sick-room, the physician who had been summoned from Bristol, arrived to consult with the medical attendant of the family. He could give no comfort: he could only say, ‘We must try, and hope. The shock which struck her, when she overheard the news of her husband’s death, has prostrated her strength at the time when she needed it most. No effort to preserve her shall be neglected. I will stay here for the night.’

He opened one of the windows to admit more air as he spoke. The view overlooked the drive in front of the

house, and the road outside. Litde groups of people were standing before the lodge-gates, looking in. ‘If those persons make any noise,’ said the doctor, ‘they must be warned away.’ There was no need to warn them: they were only the labourers who had worked on the dead man’s property, and here and there some women and children from the village. They were all thinking of him—some talking of him—and it quickened their sluggish minds to look at his house. The gendefolks thereabouts were mostly kind to them (the men said), but none like *him*. The women whispered to each other of his comforting ways, when he came into their cottages. ‘He was a cheerful man, poor soul; and thoughtful of us, too: he never came in, and stared at meal times; the rest of ’em help us, and scold us—all *he* ever said was, better luck next time.’ So they stood, and talked of him, and looked at his house and grounds, and moved off clumsily by twos and threes, with the dim sense that the sight of his pleasant face would never comfort them again. The dullest head among them knew, that night, that the hard ways of poverty would be all the harder to walk on now he was gone.

A little later, news was brought to the bedchamber door that old Mr. Clare had come alone to the house, and was waiting in the hall below, to hear what the physician said. Miss Garth was not able to go down to him herself. She sent a message. He said to the servant, ‘I’ll come, and ask again, in two hours’ time’—and went out slowly. Unlike other men in all things else, the sudden death of his old friend had produced no discernible change in him. The feeling implied in the errand of inquiry that had brought him to the house, was the one betrayal of human sympathy which escaped the rugged, impenetrable old man.

He came again, when the two hours had expired; and this time Miss Garth saw him.

They shook hands in silence. She waited; she nerved herself to hear him speak of his lost friend. No: he never mentioned the dreadful accident, he never alluded to the dreadful death. He said these words, ‘Is she better, or worse?’ and said no more. Was the tribute of his grief for the husband, sternly suppressed under the expression of his anxiety for the wife? The nature of the man, unpliably antagonistic to the world and the world’s customs, might justify some such interpretation of his conduct as this. He repeated his question, ‘Is she better, or worse?’

Miss Garth answered him:—

‘No better; if there is any change, it is a change for the worse.’

They spoke those words at the window of the morning-room which opened on the garden. Mr. Glare paused, after hearing the reply to his inquiry, stepped out on to the walk, then turned on a sudden, and spoke again:

‘Has the doctor given her up?’ he asked.

‘He has not concealed from us that she is in danger. We can only pray for her.’

The old man laid his hand on Miss Garth’s arm as she answered him, and looked her attentively in the face.

‘You believe in prayer?’ he said.

Miss Garth drew sorrowfully back from him.

‘You might have spared me that question, sir, at such a time as this.’

He took no notice of her answer; his eyes were still fastened on her face.

‘Pray!’ he said. ‘Pray as you never prayed before, for the preservation of Mrs. Vanstone’s life.’

He left her. His voice and manner implied some unutterable dread of the future, which his words had not confessed. Miss Garth followed him into the garden, and called to him. He heard her, but he never turned back:

he quickened his pace, as if he desired to avoid her. She watched him across the lawn in the warm summer moonlight. She saw his white withered hands, saw them suddenly against the black background of the shrubbery, raised and wrung above his head. They dropped—the trees shrouded him in darkness—he was gone.

Miss Garth went back to the suffering woman, with the burden on her mind of one anxiety more.

It was then past eleven o'clock. Some little time had elapsed since she had seen the sisters, and spoken to them. The inquiries she addressed to one of the female servants, only elicited the information that they were both in their rooms. She delayed her return to the mother's bedside to say her parting words of comfort to the daughters, before she left them for the night. Norah's room was the nearest. She softly opened the door and looked in. The kneeling figure by the bedside, told her that God's help had found the fatherless daughter in her affliction. Grateful tears gathered in her eyes as she looked: she softly closed the door, and went on to Magdalen's room. There, doubt stayed her feet at the threshold; and she waited for a moment before going in.

A sound in the room caught her ear—the monotonous rustling of a woman's dress, now distant, now near; passing without cessation from end to end over the floor—a sound which told her that Magdalen was pacing to and fro in the secrecy of her own chamber. Miss Garth knocked. The rustling ceased; the door was opened, and the sad young face confronted her, locked in its cold despair; the large light eyes looked mechanically into hers, as vacant and as tearless as ever.

That look wrung the heart of the faithful woman, who had trained her and loved her from a child. She took Magdalen tenderly in her arms.

'Oh, my love,' she said, 'no tears yet! Oh, if I could see you as I have seen Norah! Speak to me, Magdalen—try if you can speak to me.'

She tried, and spoke:

'Norah,' she said, 'feels no remorse. He was not serving Norah's interests when he went to his death: he was serving mine.'

With that terrible answer, she put her cold lips to Miss Garth's cheek.

'Let me bear it by myself,' she said, and gently closed the door.

Again Miss Garth waited at the threshold, and again the sound of the rustling dress passed to and fro—now far, now near—to and fro with a cruel, mechanical regularity, that chilled the warmest sympathy, and daunted the boldest hope.

The night passed. It had been agreed, if no change for the better showed itself by the morning, that the London physician whom Mrs. Vanstone had consulted some months since, should be summoned to the house on the next day. No change for the better appeared; and the physician was sent for.

As the morning advanced, Frank came to make inquiries, from the cottage. Had Mr. Clare intrusted to his son the duty which he had personally performed on the previous day, through reluctance to meet Miss Garth again after what he had said to her? It might be so. Frank could throw no light on the subject; he was not in his father's confidence. He looked pale and bewildered. His first inquiries after Magdalen, showed how his weak nature had been shaken by the catastrophe. He was not capable of framing his own questions: the words faltered on his lips, and the ready tears came into his eyes. Miss Garth's heart warmed to him for the first time. Grief has this that is noble in it—it accepts all sympathy, come whence it may. She encouraged the lad by a few kind words, and took his hand at parting.

Before noon, Frank returned with a second message. His father desired to know whether Mr. Pendril was not expected at Combe-Raven on that day. If the lawyer's arrival was looked for, Frank was directed to be in attendance at the station, and to take him to the cottage, where a bed would be placed at his disposal. This message took Miss Garth by surprise. It showed that Mr. Glare had been made acquainted with his dead friend's purpose of sending for Mr. Pendril. Was the old man's thoughtful offer of hospitality, another indirect expression of the natural human distress which he perversely concealed? or was he aware of some secret necessity for Mr. Pendril's presence, of which the bereaved family had been kept in total ignorance? Miss Garth was too heart-sick and hopeless to dwell on either question. She told Frank that Mr. Pendril had been expected at three o'clock, and sent him back with her thanks.

Shortly after his departure, such anxieties on Magdalen's account as her mind was now able to feel, were relieved by better news than her last night's experience had inclined her to hope for. Norah's influence had been exerted to rouse her sister: and Norah's patient sympathy had set the prisoned grief free. Magdalen had suffered severely—suffered inevitably, with such a nature as hers—in the effort that relieved her. The healing tears had not come gently; they had burst from her with a torturing, passionate vehemence—but Norah had never left her till the struggle was over, and the calm had come. These better tidings encouraged Miss Garth to withdraw to her own room, and to take the rest which she needed sorely. Worn out in body and mind, she slept from sheer exhaustion—slept heavily and dreamlessly for some hours. It was between three and four in the afternoon, when she was roused by one of the female servants. The woman had a note in her hand—a note left by Mr. Clare the younger, with a message desiring that it might be delivered to Miss Garth immediately. The name written in the lower comer of the envelope was 'William Pendril.' The lawyer had arrived.

Miss Garth opened the note. After a few first sentences of sympathy and condolence, the writer announced his arrival at Mr. Clare's; and then proceeded, apparently in his professional capacity, to make a very startling request.

'If,' he wrote, 'any change for the better in Mrs. Vanstone should take place—whether it is only an improvement for the time, or whether it is the permanent improvement for which we all hope—in either case, I entreat you to let me know of it immediately. It is of the last importance that I should see her, in the event of her gaining strength enough to give me her attention for five minutes, and of her being able at the expiration of that time to sign her name. May I beg that you will communicate my request, in the strictest confidence, to the medical men in attendance? They will understand, and you will understand, the vital importance I attach to this interview, when I tell you that I have arranged to defer to it all other business claims on me; and that I hold myself in readiness to obey your summons, at any hour of the day or night.'

In those terms the letter ended. Miss Garth read it twice over. At the second reading, the request which the lawyer now addressed to her, and the farewell words which had escaped Mr. Clare's lips the day before, connected themselves vaguely in her mind. There was some other serious interest in suspense, known to Mr. Pendril and known to Mr. Clare, besides the first and foremost interest of Mrs. Vanstone's recovery. Whom did it affect? The children? Were they threatened by some new calamity which their mother's signature might avert? What did it mean? Did it mean that Mr. Vanstone had died without leaving a will?

In her distress and confusion of mind, Miss Garth was incapable of reasoning with herself, as she might have reasoned at a happier time. She hastened to the ante-chamber of Mrs. Vanstone's room; and, after explaining Mr. Pendril's position towards the family, placed his letter in the hands of the medical men. They both answered without hesitation, to the same purpose. Mrs. Vanstone's condition rendered any such interview as the lawyer desired, a total impossibility. If she rallied from her present prostration, Miss Garth should be at once informed of the improvement. In the mean time, the answer to Mr. Pendril might be conveyed in one word—Impossible.

‘You see what importance Mr. Pendril attaches to the interview?’ said Miss Garth.

Yes: both the doctors saw it.

‘My mind is lost and confused, gentlemen, in this dreadful suspense. Can you either of you guess why the signature is wanted? or what the object of the interview may be? I have only seen Mr. Pendril when he has come here on former visits: I have no claim to justify me in questioning him. Will you look at the letter again? Do you think it implies that Mr. Vanstone has never made a will?’

‘I think it can hardly imply that,’ said one of the doctors. ‘But, even supposing Mr. Vanstone to have died intestate, the law takes due care of the interests of his widow and his children———’

‘Would it do so,’ interposed the other medical man, ‘if the property happened to be in land?’

‘I am not sure in that case. Do you happen to know, Miss Garth, whether Mr. Vanstone’s property was in money or in land?’

‘In money,’ replied Miss Garth. ‘I have heard him say so on more than one occasion.’

‘Then I can relieve your mind by speaking from my own experience. The law if he has died intestate, gives a third of his property to his widow, and divides the rest equally among his children.’

‘But if Mrs. Vanstone———?’

‘If Mrs. Vanstone should die,’ pursued the doctor, completing the question which Miss Garth had not the heart to conclude for herself, ‘I believe I am right in telling you that the property would, as a matter of legal course, go to the children. Whatever necessity there may be for the interview which Mr. Pendril requests, I can see no reason for connecting it with the question of Mr. Vanstone’s presumed intestacy. But, by all means, put the question, for the satisfaction of your own mind, to Mr. Pendril himself.’

Miss Garth withdrew to take the course which the doctor advised. After communicating to Mr. Pendril the medical decision which, thus far, refused him the interview that he sought, she added a brief statement of the legal question she had put to the doctors; and hinted delicately at her natural anxiety to be informed of the motives which had led the lawyer to make his request. The answer she received was guarded in the extreme: it did not impress her with a favourable opinion of Mr. Pendril. He confirmed the doctors’ interpretation of the law, in general terms only; expressed his intention of waiting at the cottage, in the hope that a change for the better might yet enable Mrs. Vanstone to see him; and closed his letter without the slightest explanation of his motives, and without a word of reference to the question of the existence, or the non-existence, of Mr. Vanstone’s will.

The marked caution of the lawyer’s reply dwelt uneasily on Miss Garth’s mind, until the long-expected event of the day recalled all her thoughts to her one absorbing anxiety on Mrs. Vanstone’s account.

Early in the evening, the physician from London arrived. He watched long by the beside of the suffering woman; he remained longer still in consultation with his medical brethren; he went back again to the sick room, before Miss Garth could prevail on him to communicate to her the opinion at which he had arrived.

When he came out into the ante-chamber for the second time, he silently took a chair by her side. She looked in his face; and the last faint hope died in her before he opened his lips.

‘I must speak the hard truth,’ he said gently. ‘All that *can* be done, *has* been done. The next four-and-twenty

hours, at most, will end your suspense. If Nature makes no effort in that time—I grieve to say it—you must prepare yourself for the worst.'

Those words said all: they were prophetic of the end.

The night passed; and she lived through it. The next day came; and she lingered on till the clock pointed to five. At that hour the tidings of her husband's death had dealt the mortal blow. When the hour came round again, the mercy of God let her go to him in the better world. Her daughters were kneeling at the bedside, as her spirit passed away. She left them unconscious of their presence; mercifully and happily insensible to the pang of the last farewell.

Her child survived her till the evening was on the wane, and the sunset was dim in the quiet western heaven. As the darkness came, the light of the frail little life—faint and feeble from the first—flickered, and went out. All that was earthly of mother and child lay, that night, on the same bed. The Angel of Death had done his awful bidding; and the two Sisters were left alone in the world.

Chapter XII

Earlier than usual, on the morning of Thursday, the twenty-third of July, Mr. Glare appeared at the door of his cottage, and stepped out into the litde strip of garden attached to his residence.

After he had taken a few turns backwards and forwards, alone, he was joined by a spare, quiet, gray-haired man, whose personal appearance was totally devoid of marked character of any kind; whose inexpressive face and conventionally-quiet manner presented nothing that attracted approval, and nothing that inspired dislike. This was Mr. Pendril—this was the man, on whose lips hung the future of the orphans at Combe-Raven.

'The time is getting on,' he said, looking towards the shrubbery, as he joined Mr. Clare. 'My appointment with Miss Garth is for eleven o'clock: it only wants ten minutes of the hour.'

'Are you to see her alone?' asked Mr. Clare.

'I left Miss Garth to decide—after warning her, first of all, that the circumstances I am compelled to disclose are of a very serious nature.'

'And *has* she decided?'

'She writes me word that she mentioned my appointment, and repeated the warning I had given her to both the daughters. The elder of the two shrinks—and who can wonder at it?—from any discussion connected with the future, which requires her presence so soon as the day after the funeral. The younger one appears to have expressed no opinion on the subject. As I understand it, she suffers herself to be passively guided by her sister's example. My interview, therefore, will take place with Miss Garth alone—and it is a very great relief to me to know it.'

He spoke the last words with more emphasis and energy than seemed habitual to him. Mr. Clare stopped, and looked at his guest attentively.

'You are almost as old as I am, sir,' he said. 'Has all your long experience as a lawyer not hardened you yet?'

‘I never knew how little it had hardened me,’ replied Mr. Pendril, quietly, ‘until I returned from London yesterday to attend the funeral. I was not warned that the daughters had resolved on following their parents to the grave. I think their presence made the closing scene of this dreadful calamity doubly painful, and doubly touching. You saw how the great concourse of people were moved by it—and *they* were in ignorance of the truth; *they* knew nothing of the cruel necessity which takes me to the house this morning. The sense of that necessity—and the sight of those poor girls at the time when I felt my hard duty towards them most painfully—shook me, as a man of my years and my way of life, is not often shaken by any distress in the present, or any suspense in the future. I have not recovered it this morning: I hardly feel sure of myself yet.’

‘A man’s composure—when he is a man like you—comes with the necessity for it,’ said Mr. Clare. ‘You must have had duties to perform as trying in their way as the duty that lies before you this morning.’

Mr. Pendril shook his head. ‘Many duties as serious; many stories more romantic. No duty so trying; no story so hopeless, as this.’

With those words they parted. Mr. Pendril left the garden for the shrubbery path which led to Combe-Raven. Mr. Clare returned to the cottage.

On reaching the passage, he looked through the open door of his litde parlour, and saw Frank sitting there in idle wretchedness, with his head resting wearily on his hand.

‘I have had an answer from your employers in London,’ said Mr. Clare. ‘In consideration of what has happened, they will allow the offer they made you to stand over for another month.’

Frank changed colour, and rose nervously from his chair.

‘Are my prospects altered?’ he asked. ‘Are Mr. Vanstone’s plans for me not to be carried out? He told Magdalen his will had provided for her. She repeated his words to me; she said I ought to know all that his goodness and generosity had done for both of us. How can his death make a change? Has anything happened?’

‘Wait till Mr. Pendril comes back from Combe-Raven,’ said his father. ‘Question him—don’t question me.’

The ready tears rose in Frank’s eyes.

‘You won’t be hard on me?’ he pleaded, faintly. ‘You won’t expect me to go back to London without seeing Magdalen first?’

Mr. Glare looked thoughtfully at his son; and considered a little before he replied.

‘You may dry your eyes,’ he said. ‘You shall see Magdalen before you go back.’

He left the room, after making that reply, and withdrew to his study. The books lay ready to his hand as usual. He opened one of them, and set himself to read in the customary manner. But his attention wandered; and his eyes strayed away from time to time, to the empty chair opposite—the chair in which his old friend and gossip had sat and wrangled with him good-humouredly for many and many a year past. After a struggle with himself, he closed the book. ‘Damn the chair!’ he said: ‘it *will* talk of him; and I must listen.’ He reached down his pipe from the wall, and mechanically filled it with tobacco. His hand shook, his eyes wandered back to the old place; and a heavy sigh came from him unwillingly. That empty chair was the only earthly argument for which he had no answer: his heart owned its defeat, and moistened his eyes in spite of him. ‘He has got the better of me at last,’ said the rugged old man. ‘There is one weak place left in me still—and *he* has found it.’

Meanwhile, Mr. Pendril entered the shrubbery, and followed the path which led to the lonely garden and the desolate house. He was met at the door by the man-servant, who was apparently waiting in expectation of his arrival.

‘I have an appointment with Miss Garth. Is she ready to see me?’

‘Quite ready, sir.’

‘Is she alone?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘In the room which was Mr. Vanstone’s study?’

‘In that room, sir.’

The servant opened the door; and Mr. Pendril went in.

The governess stood alone at the study window. The morning was oppressively hot, and she threw up the lower sash to admit more air into the room, as Mr. Pendril entered it.

They bowed to each other with a formal politeness, which betrayed on either side an uneasy sense of restraint. Mr. Pendril was one of the many men who appear superficially to the worst advantage, under the influence of strong mental agitation which it is necessary for them to control. Miss Garth, on her side, had not forgotten the ungraciously guarded terms in which the lawyer had replied to her letter; and the natural anxiety which she had felt on the subject of the interview, was not relieved by any favourable opinion of the man who sought it. As they confronted each other in the silence of the summer’s morning—both dressed in black; Miss Garth’s hard features, gaunt and haggard with grief; the lawyer’s cold, colourless face, void of all marked expression, suggestive of a business embarrassment and of nothing more—it would have been hard to find two persons less attractive externally to any ordinary sympathies than the two who had now met together, the one to tell, the other to hear, the secrets of the dead.

‘I am sincerely sorry, Miss Garth, to intrude on you at such a time as this. But circumstances, as I have already explained, leave me no other choice.’

‘Will you take a seat, Mr. Pendril? You wished to see me in this room, I believe?’

‘Only in this room, because Mr. Vanstone’s papers are kept here, and I may find it necessary to refer to some of them.’

After that formal interchange of question and answer, they sat down on either side of a table placed close under the window. One waited to speak, the other waited to hear. There was a momentary silence. Mr. Pendril broke it by referring to the young ladies, with the customary inquiries, and the customary expressions of sympathy. Miss Garth answered him with the same ceremony, in the same conventional tone. There was a second pause of silence. The humming of flies among the evergreen shrubs under the window, penetrated drowsily into the room; and the tramp of a heavy-footed cart-horse, plodding along the high-road beyond the garden, was as plainly audible in the stillness, as if it had been night.

The lawyer roused his flagging resolution, and spoke to the purpose when he spoke next.

‘You have some reason, Miss Garth,’ he began, ‘to feel not quite satisfied with my past conduct towards you, in one particular. During Mrs. Vanstone’s fatal illness, you addressed a letter to me, making certain inquiries;

which, while she lived, it was impossible for me to answer. Her deplorable death releases me from the restraint which I had imposed on myself, and permits—or, more properly, obliges me to speak. You shall know what serious reasons I had for waiting day and night in the hope of obtaining that interview which unhappily never took place; and in justice to Mr. Vanstone's memory, your own eyes shall inform you that he made his will.'

He rose; unlocked a litde iron safe in the comer of the room; and returned to the table with some folded sheets of paper, which he spread open under Miss Garth's eyes. When she had read the first words, 'In the name of God, Amen,' he turned the sheet, and pointed to the end of the next page. She saw the well-known signature: 'Andrew Vanstone.' She saw the customary attestations of the two witnesses; and the date of the document, reverting to a period of more than five years since. Having thus convinced her of the formality of the will, the lawyer interposed before she could question him, and addressed her in these words:

'I must not deceive you,' he said. 'I have my own reasons for producing this document.'

'What reasons, sir?'

'You shall hear them. When you are in possession of the truth, these pages may help to preserve your respect for Mr. Vanstone's memory———'

Miss Garth started back in her chair.

'What do you mean?' she asked, with a stem straightforwardness.

He took no heed of the question; he went on as if she had not interrupted him.

'I have a second reason,' he continued, 'for showing you the will. If I can prevail on you to read certain clauses in it, under my superintendence, you will make your own discovery of the circumstances which I am here to disclose—circumstances so painful, that I hardly know how to communicate them to you with my own lips.'

Miss Garth looked him steadfastly in the face.

'Circumstances, sir, which affect the dead parents, or the living children?'

'Which affect the dead and the living both,' answered the lawyer. 'Circumstances, I grieve to say, which involve the future of Mr. Vanstone's unhappy daughters.'

'Wait,' said Miss Garth, 'wait a little.' She pushed her grey hair back from her temples, and struggled with the sickness of heart, the dreadful faintness of terror, which would have overpowered a younger, or a less resolute woman. Her eyes dim with watching, weary with grief, searched the lawyer's unfathomable face. 'His unhappy daughters?' she repeated to herself, vacantly. 'He talks as if there was some worse calamity than the calamity which has made them orphans.' She paused once more; and rallied her sinking courage. 'I will not make your hard duty, sir, more painful to you than I can help,' she resumed. 'Show me the place in the will. Let me read it, and know the worst.'

Mr. Pendril turned back to the first page, and pointed to a certain place in the cramped lines of writing. 'Begin here,' he said.

She tried to begin; she tried to follow his finger, as she had followed it already to the signatures and the dates. But her senses seemed to share the confusion of her mind—the words mingled together, and the lines swam before her eyes.

'I can't follow you,' she said. 'You must tell it, or read it to me.' She pushed her chair back from the table, and

tried to collect herself. ‘Stop!’ she exclaimed, as the lawyer, with visible hesitation and reluctance, took the papers in his own hand. ‘One question, first. Does his will provide for his children?’

‘His will provided for them, when he made it.’

‘When he made it?’ (Something of her natural bluntness broke out in her manner as she repeated the answer.) ‘Does it provide for them now?’

‘It does not.’

She snatched the will from his hand, and threw it into a comer of the room. ‘You mean well,’ she said; ‘you wish to spare me—but you are wasting your time, and my strength. If the will is useless, there let it lie. Tell me the truth, Mr. Pendril—tell it plainly, tell it instandy, in your own words!’

He felt that it would be useless cruelty to resist that appeal. There was no merciful alternative but to answer it on the spot.

‘I must refer you to the spring of the present year, Miss Garth. Do you remember the fourth of March?’

Her attention wandered again; a thought seemed to have struck her at the moment when he spoke. Instead of answering his inquiry, she put a question of her own.

‘Let me break the news to myself,’ she said—‘let me anticipate you, if I can. His useless will, the terms in which you speak of his daughters, the doubt you seem to feel of my continued respect for his memory, have opened a new view to me. Mr. Vanstone has died a ruined man—is that what you had to tell me?’

‘Far from it. Mr. Vanstone has died, leaving a fortune of more than eighty thousand pounds—a fortune invested in excellent securities. He lived up to his income, but never beyond it; and all his debts added together would not reach two hundred pounds. If he had died a ruined man, I should have felt deeply for his children—but I should not have hesitated to tell you the truth, as I am hesitating now. Let me repeat a question which escaped you, I think, when I first put it. Carry your mind back to the spring of this year. Do you remember the fourth of March?’

Miss Garth shook her head. ‘My memory for dates is bad at the best of times,’ she said. ‘I am too confused to exert it at a moment’s notice. Can you put your question in no other form?’

He put it in this form:—

‘Do you remember any domestic event in the spring of the present year, which appeared to affect Mr. Vanstone more seriously than usual?’

Miss Garth leaned forward in her chair, and looked eagerly at Mr. Pendril across the table. ‘The journey to London!’ she exclaimed. ‘I distrusted the journey to London from the first! Yes! I remember Mr. Vanstone receiving a letter—I remember his reading it, and looking so altered from himself that he startled us all.’

‘Did you notice any apparent understanding between Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone, on the subject of that letter?’

‘Yes: I did. One of the girls—it was Magdalen—mentioned the postmark; some place in America. It all comes back to me, Mr. Pendril. Mrs. Vanstone looked excited and anxious, the moment she heard the place named. They went to London together the next day; they explained nothing to their daughters, nothing to me. Mrs. Vanstone said the journey was for family affairs. I suspected something wrong; I couldn’t tell what. Mrs. Vanstone wrote to me from London, saying that her object was to consult a physician on the state of her health,

and not to alarm her daughters by telling them. Something in the letter rather hurt me at the time. I thought there might be some other motive that she was keeping from me. Did I do her wrong?'

'You did her no wrong. There *was* a motive which she was keeping from you. In revealing that motive, I reveal the painful secret which brings me to this house. All that I could do to prepare you, I have done. Let me now tell the truth in the plainest and fewest words. When Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone left Combe-Raven, in the March of the present year———'

Before he could complete the sentence, a sudden movement of Miss Garth's interrupted him. She started violently, and looked round towards the window. 'Only the wind among the leaves,' she said, faintly. 'My nerves are so shaken, the least thing startles me. Speak out, for God's sake! When Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone left this house, tell me in plain words—why did they go to London?'

In plain words, Mr. Pendril told her:

'They went to London to be married.'

With that answer he placed a slip of paper on the table. It was the marriage certificate of the dead parents, and the date it bore was March the twentieth, eighteen hundred and forty-six.

Miss Garth neither moved nor spoke. The certificate lay beneath her unnoticed. She sat with her eyes rooted on the lawyer's face; her mind stunned, her senses helpless. He saw that all his efforts to break the shock of the discovery had been efforts made in vain; he felt the vital importance of rousing her, and firmly and distinctly repeated the fatal words.

'They went to London to be married,' he said. 'Try to rouse yourself: try to realize the plain fact first: the explanation shall come afterwards. Miss Garth, I speak the miserable truth! In the spring of this year they left home; they lived in London for a fortnight, in the strictest retirement; they were married by licence at the end of that time. There is a copy of the certificate, which I myself obtained on Monday last. Read the date of the marriage for yourself. It is Friday, the twentieth of March—the March of this present year.'

As he pointed to the certificate, that faint breath of air among the shrubs beneath the window, which had startled Miss Garth, stirred the leaves once more. He heard it himself, this time; and turned his face, so as to let the breeze play upon it. No breeze came; no breath of air that was strong enough for him to feel, floated into the room.

Miss Garth roused herself mechanically, and read the certificate. It seemed to produce no distinct impression on her: she laid it on one side, in a lost bewildered manner. 'Twelve years,' she said, in low hopeless tones —'twelve quiet happy years I lived with this family. Mrs. Vanstone was my friend; my dear, valued friend—my sister, I might almost say. I can't believe it. Bear with me a little, sir, I can't believe it yet.'

'I shall help you to believe it, when I tell you more,' said Mr. Pendril—'you will understand me better when I take you back to the time of Mr. Vanstone's early life. I won't ask for your attention just yet. Let us wait a little, until you recover yourself.'

They waited a few minutes. The lawyer took some letters from his pocket, referred to them attentively, and put them back again. 'Can you listen to me, now?' he asked kindly. She bowed her head in answer. Mr. Pendril considered with himself for a moment. 'I must caution you on one point,' he said. 'If the aspect of Mr. Vanstone's character which I am now about to present to you, seems in some respects at variance with your later experience, bear in mind that when you first knew him twelve years since, he was a man of forty; and that,

when I first knew him, he was a lad of nineteen.'

His next words raised the veil, and showed the irrevocable Past.

Chapter XIII

'The fortune which Mr. Vanstone possessed when you knew him' (the lawyer began) 'was part, and part only, of the inheritance which fell to him on his father's death. Mr. Vanstone the elder, was a manufacturer in the North of England. He married early in life; and the children of the marriage were either six, or seven in number —I am not certain which. First, Michael, the eldest son, still living, and now an old man turned seventy. Secondly, Selina, the eldest daughter, who married in after-life, and who died ten or eleven years ago. After those two, came other sons and daughters whose early deaths make it unnecessary to mention them particularly. The last and by many years the youngest of the children was Andrew, whom I first knew, as I told you, at the age of nineteen. My father was then on the point of retiring from the active pursuit of his profession; and, in succeeding to his business, I also succeeded to his connection with the Vanstones, as the family solicitor.

'At that time, Andrew had just started in life by entering the army. After little more than a year of home-service, he was ordered out with his regiment to Canada. When he quitted England, he left his father and his elder brother Michael seriously at variance. I need not detain you by entering into the cause of the quarrel. I need only tell you that the elder Mr. Vanstone, with many excellent qualities, was a man of fierce and intractable temper. His eldest son had set him at defiance, under circumstances which might have justly irritated a father of far milder character; and he declared, in the most positive terms, that he would never see Michael's face again. In defiance of my entreaties, and of the entreaties of his wife, he tore up, in our presence, the will which provided for Michael's share in the paternal inheritance. Such was the family position, when the younger son left home for Canada.

'Some months after Andrew's arrival with his regiment at Quebec, he became acquainted with a woman of great personal attractions, who came, or said she came, from one of the southern states of America. She obtained an immediate influence over him: and she used it to the basest purpose. You knew the easy, affectionate, trusting nature of the man, in later life—you can imagine how thoughtlessly he acted on the impulses of his youth. It is useless to dwell on this lamentable part of the story. He was just twenty-one: he was blindly devoted to a worthless woman; and she led him on, with merciless cunning, till it was too late to draw back. In one word, he committed the fatal error of his life: he married her.

'She had been wise enough in her own interests to dread the influence of his brother officers, and to persuade him, up to the period of the marriage ceremony, to keep the proposed union between them a secret. She could do this; but she could not provide against the results of accident. Hardly three months had passed, when a chance disclosure exposed the life she had led, before her marriage. But one alternative was left to her husband—the alternative of instantly separating from her.

'The effect of the discovery on the unhappy boy—for a boy in disposition he still was—may be judged by the event which followed the exposure. One of Andrew's superior officers—a certain Major Kirke, if I remember right—found him* in his quarters, writing to his father a confession of the disgraceful truth, with a loaded pistol by his side. That officer saved the lad's life from his own hand; and hushed up the scandalous affair, by a compromise. The marriage being a perfectly legal one, and the wife's misconduct prior to the ceremony, giving her husband no claim to his release from her by divorce, it was only possible to appeal to her sense of her own

interests. A handsome annual allowance was secured to her, on condition that she returned to the place from which she had come; that she never appeared in England; and that she ceased to use her husband's name. Other stipulations were added to these. She accepted them all; and measures were privately taken to have her well looked after in the place of her retreat. What life she led there, and whether she performed all the conditions imposed on her, I cannot say. I can only tell you that she never, to my knowledge, came to England; that she never annoyed Mr. Vanstone; and that the annual allowance was paid her, through a local agent in America, to the day of her death. All that she wanted in marrying him was money; and money she got.

'In the mean time, Andrew had left the regiment. Nothing would induce him to face his brother-officers after what had happened. He sold out, and returned to England. The first intelligence which reached him on his return, was the intelligence of his father's death. He came to my office in London, before going home, and there learnt from my lips how the family quarrel had ended.

'The will which Mr. Vanstone the elder had destroyed in my presence, had not been, so far as I knew, replaced by another. When I was sent for, in the usual course, on his death, I fully expected that the law would be left to make the customary division among his widow and his children. To my surprise, a will appeared among his papers, correctly drawn and executed, and dated about a week after the period when the first will had been destroyed. He had maintained his vindictive purpose against his eldest son; and had applied to a stranger for the professional assistance which I honestly believe he was ashamed to ask for at my hands.

'It is needless to trouble you with the provisions of the will in detail. There were the widow, and three surviving children to be provided for. The window received a life-interest only, in a portion of the testator's property. The remaining portion was divided between Andrew and Selina —two-thirds to the brother; one-third to the sister. On the mother's death, the money from which her income had been derived, was to go to Andrew and Selina, in the same relative proportions as before—five thousand pounds having been first deducted from the sum, and paid to Michael, as the sole legacy left by the implacable father to his eldest son.

'Speaking in round numbers, the division of property, as settled by the will, stood thus. Before the mother's death, Andrew had seventy thousand pounds; Selina had thirty-five thousand pounds; Michael—had nothing. After the mother's death, Michael had five thousand pounds, to set against Andrew's inheritance augmented to one hundred thousand, and Selina's inheritance increased to fifty thousand.—Do not suppose that I am dwelling unnecessarily on this part of the subject. Every word I now speak bears on interests still in suspense, which vitally concern Mr. Vanstone's daughters. As we get on from past to present, keep in mind the terrible inequality of Michael's inheritance and Andrew's inheritance. The harm done by that vindictive will is, I greatly fear, not over yet.

'Andrew's first impulse, when he heard the news which I had to tell him, was worthy of the open, generous nature of the man. He at once proposed to divide his inheritance with his elder brother. But there was one serious obstacle in the way. A letter from Michael was waiting for him at my office, when he came there; and that letter charged him with being the original cause of estrangement between his father and his elder brother. The efforts which he had made—bluntly and incautiously, I own; but with the purest and kindest intentions, as I know—to compose the quarrel before leaving home, were perverted by the vilest misconstruction, to support an accusation of treachery and falsehood which would have stung any man to the quick. Andrew felt, what I felt, that if these imputations were not withdrawn, before his generous intentions towards his brother took effect, the mere fact of their execution would amount to a practical acknowledgment of the justice of Michael's charge against him. He wrote to his brother in the most forbearing terms. The answer received was as offensive as words could make it. Michael had inherited his father's temper, unredeemed by his father's better qualities: his second letter reiterated the charges contained in the first, and declared that he would only accept the offered

division as an act of atonement and restitution on Andrew's part. I next wrote to the mother, to use her influence. She was herself aggrieved at being left with nothing more than a life interest in her husband's property; she sided resolutely with Michael; and she stigmatized Andrew's proposal as an attempt to bribe her eldest son into withdrawing a charge against his brother, which that brother knew to be true. After this last repulse, nothing more could be done. Michael withdrew to the Continent; and his mother followed him there. She lived long enough, and saved money enough out of her income, to add considerably, at her death, to her elder son's five thousand pounds. He had previously still further improved his pecuniary position by an advantageous marriage; and he is now passing the close of his days either in France or Switzerland—a widower, with one son. We shall return to him shordy. In the mean time, I need only tell you that Andrew and Michael never again met—never again communicated, even by writing. To all intents and purposes, they were dead to each other, from those early days to the present time.

'You can now estimate what Andrew's position was when he left his profession and returned to England. Possessed of a fortune, he was alone in the world;—his future destroyed at the fair outset of life; his mother and brother estranged from him; his sister lately married, with interests and hopes in which he had no share. Men of firmer mental calibre might have found refuge from such a situation as this, in an absorbing intellectual pursuit. He was not capable of the effort; all the strength of his character lay in the affections he had wasted. His place in the world was that quiet place at home, with wife and children to make his life happy, which he had lost for ever. To look back was more than he dare. To look forward was more than he could. In sheer despair, he let his own impetuous youth drive him on; and cast himself into the lowest dissipations of a London life.

'A woman's falsehood had driven him to his ruin. A woman's love saved him at the outset of his downward career. Let us not speak of her harshly—for we laid her with him yesterday in the grave.

'You, who only knew Mrs. Vanstone in later life, when illness and sorrow and secret care had altered and saddened her, can form no adequate idea of her attractions of person and character when she was a girl of seventeen. I was with Andrew when he first met her. I had tried to rescue him for one night at least, from degrading associates and degrading pleasures, by persuading him to go with me to a ball given by one of the great City Companies. There, they met. She produced a strong impression on him, the moment he saw her. To me, as to him, she was a total stranger. An introduction to her, obtained in the customary manner, informed him that she was the daughter of one Mr. Blake. The rest he discovered from herself. They were partners in the dance (unobserved in that crowded ball-room), all through the evening.

'Circumstances were against her from the first. She was unhappy at home. Her family and friends occupied no recognized station in life: they were mean, underhand people, in every way unworthy of her. It was her first ball—it was the first time she had ever met with a man who had the breeding, the manners, and the conversation of a gentleman. Are these excuses for her, which I have no right to make? If we have any human feeling for human weakness, surely not!

'The meeting of that night, decided their future. When other meetings had followed, when the confession of her love had escaped her, he took the one course of all others (took it innocently and unconsciously), which was most dangerous to them both. His frankness and his sense of honour forbade him to deceive her: he opened his heart, and told her the truth. She was a generous, impulsive girl; she had no home ties strong enough to plead with her; she was passionately fond of him—and he had made that appeal to her pity, which, to the eternal honour of women, is the hardest of all appeals for them to resist. She saw, and saw truly, that she alone stood between him and his ruin. The last chance of his rescue hung on her decision. She decided; and saved him.

'Let me not be misunderstood; let me not be accused of trifling with the serious social question on which my narrative forces me to touch. I will defend her memory by no false reasoning—I will only speak the truth. It is

the truth that she snatched him from mad excesses which must have ended in his early death. It is the truth that she restored him to that happy home-existence which you remember so tenderly—which *he* remembered so gratefully that, on the day when he was free, he made her his wife. Let strict morality claim its right, and condemn her early fault. I have read my New Testament to little purpose indeed, if Christian mercy may not soften the hard sentence against her—if Christian charity may not find a plea for her memory in the love and fidelity, the suffering and the sacrifice of her whole life.

'A few words more will bring us to a later time, and to events which have happened within your own experience.

'I need not remind you that the position in which Mr. Vanstone was now placed, could lead in the end to but one result—to a disclosure, more or less inevitable, of the truth. Attempts were made to keep the hopeless misfortune of his life a secret from Miss Blake's family; and, as a matter of course, those attempts failed before the relentless scrutiny of her father and her friends. What might have happened if her relatives had been, what is termed, 'respectable,' I cannot pretend to say. As it was, they were people who could (in the common phrase) be conveniently treated with. The only survivor of the family at the present time, is a scoundrel calling himself Captain Wragge. When I tell you that he privately extorted the price of his silence from Mrs. Vanstone, to the last; and when I add that his conduct presents no extraordinary exception to the conduct, in their lifetime, of the other relatives—you will understand what sort of people I had to deal with in my client's interests, and how their assumed indignation was appeased.

'Having, in the first instance, left England for Ireland, Mr. Vanstone and Miss Blake remained there afterwards for some years. Girl as she was, she faced her position and its necessities without flinching. Having once resolved to sacrifice her life to the man she loved; having quieted her conscience by persuading herself that his marriage was a legal mockery, and that she was 'his wife in the sight of Heaven;' she set herself from the first to accomplish the one foremost purpose of so living with him, in the world's eye, as never to raise the suspicion that she was not his lawful wife. The women are few indeed, who cannot resolve firmly, scheme patiendy, and act prompdy, where the dearest interests of their lives are concerned. Mrs. Vanstone—she has a right now, remember, to that name—Mrs. Vanstone had more than the average share of a woman's tenacity and a woman's tact; and she took all the needful precautions, in those early days, which her husband's less ready capacity had not the art to devise—precautions to which they were largely indebted for the preservation of their secret in later times.

'Thanks to these safeguards, not a shadow of suspicion followed them when they returned to England. They first settled in Devonshire, merely because they were far removed there from that northern county in which Mr. Vanstone's family and connections had been known. On the part of his surviving relatives, they had no curious investigations to dread. He was totally estranged from his mother and his elder brother. His married sister had been forbidden by her husband (who was a clergyman) to hold any communication with him, from the period when he had fallen into the deplorable way of life which I have described as following his return from Canada. Other relations he had none. When he and Miss Blake left Devonshire, their next change of residence was to this house. Neither courting, nor avoiding notice; simply happy in themselves, in their children, and in their quiet rural life; unsuspected by the few neighbours who formed their modest circle of acquaintance to be other than what they seemed—the truth in their case, as in the cases of many others, remained undiscovered until accident forced it into the light of day.

'If, in your close intimacy with them, it seems strange that they should never have betrayed themselves, let me ask you to consider the circumstances, and you will understand the apparent anomaly. Remember that they had been living as husband and wife, to all intents and purposes (except that the marriage service had not been read

over them) for fifteen years before you came into the house; and bear in mind, at the same time, that no event occurred to disturb Mr. Vanstone's happiness in the present, to remind him of the past, or to warn him of the future, until the announcement of his wife's death reached him, in that letter from America which you saw placed in his hand. From that day forth—when a past which *he* abhorred was forced back to his memory; when a future which *she* had never dared to anticipate was placed within her reach—you will soon perceive, if you have not perceived already, that they both betrayed themselves, time after time; and that your innocence of all suspicion, and their children's innocence of all suspicion, alone prevented you from discovering the truth.

'The sad story of the past is now as well known to you as to me. I have had hard words to speak. God knows I have spoken them with true sympathy for the living, with true tenderness for the memory of the dead.'

He paused, turned his face a litde away, and rested his head on his hand, in the quiet undemonstrative manner which was natural to him. Thus far, Miss Garth had only interrupted his narrative by an occasional word, Or by a mute token of her attention. She made no effort to conceal her tears; they fell fast and silently over her wasted cheeks, as she looked up and spoke to him. 'I have done you some injury, sir, in my thoughts,' she said, with a noble simplicity. 'I know you better now. Let me ask your forgiveness; let me take your hand.'

Those words, and the action which accompanied them, touched him deeply. He took her hand in silence. She was the first to speak, the first to set the example of self-control. It is one of the noble instincts of women, that nothing more powerfully rouses them to struggle with their own sorrow than the sight of a man's distress. She quietly dried her tears; she quietly drew her chair round the table so as to sit nearer to him when she spoke again.

'I have been sadly broken, Mr. Pendril, by what has happened in this house,' she said, 'or I should have borne what you have told me, better than I have borne it to-day. Will you let me ask one question, before you go on? My heart aches for the children of my love—more than ever my children now. Is there no hope for their future? Are they left with no prospect but poverty before them?'

The lawyer hesitated before he answered the question.

'They are left dependent,' he said, at last, 'on the justice and the mercy of a stranger.'

'Through the misfortune of their birth?'

'Through the misfortunes which have followed the marriage of their parents.'

With that startling answer he rose, took up the will from the floor, and restored it to its former position on the table between them.

'I can only place the truth before you;' he resumed, 'in one plain form of words. The marriage has destroyed this will, and has left Mr. Vanstone's daughters dependent on their uncle.'

As he spoke, the breeze stirred again among the shrubs under the window.

'On their uncle?' repeated Miss Garth. She considered for a moment, and laid her hand suddenly on Mr. Pendril's arm. 'Not on Michael Vanstone!'

'Yes: on Michael Vanstone.'

Miss Garth's hand still mechanically grasped the lawyer's arm. Her whole mind was absorbed in the effort to realize the discovery which had now burst on her.

‘Dependent on Michael Vanstone!’ she said to herself. ‘Dependent on their father’s bitterest enemy? How can it be?’

‘Give me your attention for a few minutes more,’ said Mr. Pendril, ‘and you shall hear. The sooner we can bring this painful interview to a close, the sooner I can open communications with Mr. Michael Vanstone, and the sooner you will know what he decides on doing for his brother’s orphan daughters. I repeat to you that they are absolutely dependent on him. You will most readily understand how and why, if we take up the chain of events where we last left it—at the period of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone’s marriage.’

‘One moment, sir,’ said Miss Garth. ‘Were you in the secret of that marriage at the time when it took place?’

‘Unhappily, I was not. I was away from London—away from England at the time. If Mr. Vanstone had been able to communicate with me when the letter from America announced the death of his wife, the fortunes of his daughters would not have been now at stake.’

He paused: and before proceeding further, looked once more at the letters which he had consulted at an earlier period of the interview. He took one letter from the rest, and put it on the table by his side.

‘At the beginning of the present year,’ he resinned, ‘a very serious business necessity, in connection with some West Indian property possessed by an old client and friend of mine, required the presence either of myself, or of one of my two partners, in Jamaica. One of the two could not be spared: the other was not in health to undertake the voyage. There was no choice left but for me to go. I wrote to Mr. Vanstone, telling him that I should leave England at the end of February, and that the nature of the business which took me away afforded little hope of my getting back from the West Indies before June. My letter was not written with any special motive. I merely thought it right—seeing that my partners were not admitted to my knowledge of Mr. Vanstone’s private affairs—to warn him of my absence, as a measure of formal precaution which it was right to take. At the end of February I left England, without having heard from him. I was on the sea when the news of his wife’s death reached him, on the fourth of March; and I did not return until the middle of last June.’

‘You warned him of your departure,’ interposed Miss Garth. ‘Did you not warn him of your return?’

‘Not personally. My head-clerk sent him one of the circulars which were despatched from my office, in various directions, to announce my return. It was the first substitute I thought of, for the personal letter which the pressure of innumerable occupations, all crowding on me together after my long absence, did not allow me leisure to write. Barely a month later, the first information of his marriage reached me in a letter from himself, written on the day of the fatal accident. The circumstances which induced him to write, arose out of an event in which you must have taken some interest—I mean the attachment between Mr. Clare’s son and Mr. Vanstone’s youngest daughter.’

‘I cannot say that I was favourably disposed towards that attachment at the time,’ replied Miss Garth. ‘I was ignorant then of the family secret: I know better now.’

‘Exactly. The motive which you can now appreciate is the motive that leads us to the point. The young lady herself (as I have heard from the elder Mr. Clare, to whom I am indebted for my knowledge of the circumstances in detail) confessed her attachment to her father, and innocently touched him to the quick by a chance reference to his own early life. He had a long conversation with Mrs. Vanstone, at which they both agreed that Mr. Clare must be privately informed of the truth, before the attachment between the two young people was allowed to proceed further. It was painful in the last degree, both to husband and wife, to be reduced to this alternative. But they were resolute, honourably resolute, in making the sacrifice of their own feelings; and Mr. Vanstone betook himself on the spot to Mr. Clare’s cottage.—You no doubt observed a remarkable change

in Mr. Vanstone's manner on that day; and you can now account for it?'

Miss Garth bowed her head; and Mr. Pendril went on.

'You are sufficiently acquainted with Mr. Clare's contempt for all social prejudices,' he continued, 'to anticipate his reception of the confession which his neighbour addressed to him. Five minutes after the interview had begun, the two old friends were as easy and unrestrained together as usual. In the course of conversation, Mr. Vanstone mentioned the pecuniary arrangement which he had made for the benefit of his daughter and of her future husband—and, in doing so, he naturally referred to his will, here, on the table between us. Mr. Clare, remembering that his friend had been married in the March of that year, at once asked when the will had been executed; received the reply that it had been made five years since; and, thereupon, astounded Mr. Vanstone by telling him bluntly that the document was waste paper in the eye of the law. Up to that moment, he, like many other persons, had been absolutely ignorant that a man's marriage is, legally, as well as socially, considered to be the most important event in his life; that it destroys the validity of any will which he may have made as a single man; and that it renders absolutely necessary the entire reassertion of his testamentary intentions in the character of a husband. The statement of this plain fact appeared to overwhelm Mr. Vanstone. Declaring that his friend had laid him under an obligation which he should remember to his dying day, he at once left the cottage, at once returned home, and wrote me this letter:'

He handed the letter open to Miss Garth. In tearless, speechless grief, she read these words:

'My Dear Pendril,—Since we last wrote to each other, an extraordinary change has taken place in my life. About a week after you went away, I received news from America which told me that I was free. Need I say what use I made of that freedom? Need I say that the mother of my children is now my Wife?

'If you are surprised at not having heard from me the moment you got back, attribute my silence, in great part—if not altogether—to my own total ignorance of the legal necessity for making another will. Not half an hour since, I was enlightened for the first time (under circumstances which I will mention when we meet) by my old friend, Mr. Clare. Family anxieties have had something to do with my silence, as well. My wife's confinement is close at hand; and, besides this serious anxiety, my second daughter is just engaged to be married. Until I saw Mr. Clare to-day, these matters so filled my mind that I never thought of writing to you, during the one short month which is all that has passed since I got news of your return. Now I know that my will must be made again, I write instantly. For God's sake, come on the day when you receive this—come and relieve me from the dreadful thought that my two darling girls are at this moment unprovided for. If anything happened to me, and if my desire to do their mother justice, ended (through my miserable ignorance of the law) in leaving Norah and Magdalen disinherited, I should not rest in my grave! Come, at any cost, to yours ever,

'A. v:

'On the Saturday morning,' Mr. Pendril resumed, 'those lines reached me. I instantly set aside all other business, and drove to the railway. At the London terminus, I heard the first news of the Friday's accident; heard it, with conflicting accounts of the numbers and names of the passengers killed. At Bristol, they were better informed; and the dreadful truth about Mr. Vanstone was confirmed. I had time to recover myself, before I reached your station here, and found Mr. Clare's son waiting for me. He took me to his father's cottage; and there, without losing a moment, I drew out Mrs. Vanstone's will. My object was to secure the only provision for her daughters which it was now possible to make. Mr. Vanstone having died intestate, a third of his fortune would go to his widow; and the rest would be divided among his next of kin. As children born out of wedlock,* Mr. Vanstone's daughters, under the circumstances of their father's death, had no more claim to a share in his property, than the daughters of one of his labourers in the village. The one chance left, was that their mother

might sufficiently recover to leave her third share to them, by will, in the event of her decease. Now you know why I wrote to you to ask for that interview—why I waited day and night, in the hope of receiving a summons to the house. I was sincerely sorry to send back such an answer to your note of inquiry as I was compelled to write. But while there was a chance of the preservation of Mrs. Vanstone's life, the secret of the marriage was hers, not mine; and every consideration of delicacy forbade me to disclose it.'

'You did right, sir,' said Miss Garth; 'I understand your motives, and respect them.'

'My last attempt to provide for the daughters,' continued Mr. Pendril, 'was, as you know, rendered unavailing by the dangerous nature of Mrs. Vanstone's illness. Her death left the infant who survived her by a few hours (the infant bom, you will remember, in lawful wedlock) possessed, in due legal course, of the whole of Mr. Vanstone's fortune. On the child's death—if it had only outlived the mother by a few seconds, instead of a few hours, the result would have been the same—the next of kin to the legitimate offspring took the money; and that next of kin is the infant's paternal uncle, Michael Vanstone. The whole fortune of eighty thousand pounds has virtually passed into his possession already.'

'Are there no other relations?' asked Miss Garth. 'Is there no hope from any one else?'

'There are no other relations with Michael Vanstone's claim,' said the lawyer. 'There are no grandfathers or grandmothers of the dead child (on the side of either of the parents) now alive. It was not likely there should be, considering the ages of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone, when they died. But it is a misfortune to be reasonably lamented that no other uncles or aunts survive. There are cousins alive; a son and two daughters of that elder sister of Mr. Vanstone's, who married Archdeacon Bartram, and who died, as I told you, some years since. But their interest is superseded by the interest of the nearer blood. No, Miss Garth; we must look facts as they are resolutely in the face. Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children; and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle's mercy.'

'A cruel law, Mr. Pendril—a cruel law in a Christian country.'

'Gruel as it is, Miss Garth, it stands excused by a shocking peculiarity in this case. I am far from defending the law of England, as it affects illegitimate offspring. On the contrary, I think it a disgrace to the nation. It visits the sins of the parents on the children; it encourages vice by depriving fathers and mothers of the strongest of all motives for making the atonement of marriage; and it claims to produce these two abominable results in the names of morality and religion. But it has no extraordinary oppression to answer for, in the case of these unhappy girls. The more merciful and Christian law of other countries, which allows the marriage of the parents to make the children legitimate, has no mercy on *these* children. The accident of their father having been married, when he first met with their mother, has made them the outcasts of the whole social community: it has placed them out of the pale of the Civil Law of Europe. I tell you the hard truth—it is useless to disguise it. There is no hope, if we look back at the past: there may be hope, if we look on to the future. The best service which I can now render you, is to shorten the period of your suspense. In less than an hour I shall be on my way back to London. Immediately on my arrival I will ascertain the speediest means of communicating with Mr. Michael Vanstone; and will let you know the result. Sad as the position of the two sisters now is, we must look at it on its best side; we must not lose hope.'

'Hope?' repeated Miss Garth. 'Hope from Michael Vanstone!'

'Yes; hope from the influence on him of time, if not from the influence of mercy. As I have already told you, he is now an old man; he cannot, in the course of nature, expect to live much longer. If he looks back to the period when he and his brother were first at variance, he must look back through thirty years. Surely, these are softening influences which must affect any man? Surely, his own knowledge of the shocking circumstances

under which he has become possessed of this money, will plead with him, if nothing else does?'

'I will try to think as you do, Mr. Pendril—I will try to hope for the best. Shall we be left long in suspense before the decision reaches us?'

'I trust not. The only delay on my side will be caused by the necessity of discovering the place of Michael Vanstone's residence on the Continent. I think I have the means of meeting this difficulty successfully; ^and the moment I reach London, those means shall be tried.'

He took up his hat; and then returned to the table on which the father's last letter, and the father's useless will, were lying side by side. After a moment's consideration, he placed them both in Miss Garth's hands.

'It may help you in breaking the hard truth to the orphan sisters,' he said, in his quiet, self-repressed way, 'if they can see how their father refers to them in his will—if they can read his letter to me, the last he ever wrote. Let these tokens tell them that the one idea of their father's life, was the idea of making atonement to his children. "They may think bitterly of their birth," he said to me, at the time when I drew this useless will; "but they shall never think bitterly of *me*. I will cross them in nothing: they shall never know a sorrow that I can spare them, or a want which I will not satisfy." He made me put those words in his will, to plead for him when the truth which he had concealed from his children in his lifetime, was revealed to them after his death. No law can deprive his daughters of the legacy of his repentance and his love. I leave the will and the letter to help you: I give them both into your care.'

He saw how his parting kindness touched her, and thoughtfully hastened the farewell. She took his hand in both her own, and murmured a few broken words of gratitude. 'Trust me to do my best,' he said—and, turning away with a merciful abruptness, left her. In the broad, cheerful sunshine, he had come in to reveal the fatal truth. In the broad, cheerful sunshine—that truth disclosed—he went out.

Chapter XIV

It was nearly an hour past noon, when Mr. Pendril left the house. Miss Garth sat down again at the table alone; and tried to face the necessity which the event of the morning now forced on her.

Her mind was not equal to the effort. She tried to lessen the strain on it—to lose the sense of her own position—to escape from her thoughts for a few minutes only. After a little, she opened Mr. Vanstone's letter, and mechanically set herself to read it through once more.

One by one, the last words of the dead man fastened themselves more and more firmly on her attention. The unrelieved solitude, the unbroken silence, helped their influence on her mind, and opened it to those very impressions of past and present which she was most anxious to shun. As she reached the melancholy lines which closed the letter, she found herself—insensibly, almost unconsciously, at first—tracing the fatal chain of events, link by link backwards, until she reached its beginning in the contemplated marriage between Magdalen and Francis Clare.

That marriage had taken Mr. Vanstone to his old friend, with the confession on his lips which would otherwise never have escaped them. Thence came the discovery which had sent him home to summon the lawyer to the house. That summons, again, had produced the inevitable acceleration of the Saturday's journey to Friday; the Friday of the fatal accident, the Friday when he went to his death. From his death, followed the second

bereavement which had made the house desolate; the helpless position of the daughters whose prosperous future had been his dearest care; the revelation of the secret which had overwhelmed her that morning; the disclosure, more terrible still, which she now stood committed to make to the orphan sisters. For the first time, she saw the whole sequence of events—saw it as plainly as the cloudless blue of the sky, and the green glow of the trees in the sunlight outside.

How—when could she tell them? Who could approach them with the disclosure of their own illegitimacy, before their father and mother had been dead a week? Who could speak the dreadful words, while the first tears were wet on their cheeks, while the first pang of separation was at its keenest in their hearts, while the memory of the funeral was not a day old yet? Not their last friend left; not the faithful woman whose heart bled for them. No! silence for the present time, at all risks—merciful silence, for many days to come!

She left the room, with the will and the letter in her hand—with the natural, human pity at her heart, which sealed her lips and shut her eyes resolutely to the future. In the hall, she stopped and listened. Not a sound was audible. She softly ascended the stairs, on her way to her own room, and passed the door of Norah's bed-chamber. Voices inside, the voices of the two sisters, caught her ear. After a moment's consideration, she checked herself, turned back, and quickly descended the stairs again. Both Norah and Magdalen knew of the interview between Mr. Pendril and herself: she had felt it her duty to show them his letter, making the appointment. Could she excite their suspicion by locking herself up from them in her room, as soon as the lawyer had left the house? Her hand trembled on the banister; she felt that her face might betray her. The self-forgetful fortitude, which had never failed her until that day, had been tried once too often—had been tasked beyond its powers at last.

At the hall-door, she reflected for a moment again, and went into the garden; directing her steps to a rustic bench and table placed out of sight of the house, among the trees. In past times, she had often sat there, with Mrs. Vanstone on one side, with Norah on the other, with Magdalen and the dogs romping on the grass. Alone, she sat there now—the will and the letter, which she dared not trust out of her own possession, laid on the table—her head bowed over them; her face hidden in her hands. Alone, she sat there, and tried to rouse her sinking courage.

Doubts thronged on her of the dark days to come; dread beset her of the hidden danger which her own silence towards Norah and Magdalen, might store up in the near future. The accident of a moment might suddenly reveal the truth. Mr. Pendril might write, might personally address himself to the sisters, in the natural conviction that she had enlightened them. Complications might gather round them at a moment's notice; unforeseen necessities might arise for immediately leaving the house. She saw all these perils—and still the cruel courage to face the worst, and speak, was as far from her as ever. Ere long, the thickening conflict of her thoughts forced its way outward for relief, in words and actions. She raised her head, and beat her hand helplessly on the table.

'God help me, what am I to do!' she broke out. 'How am I to tell them?'

'There is no need to tell them,' said a voice, behind her. 'They know it already.'

She started to her feet; and looked round. It was Magdalen who stood before her—Magdalen who had spoken those words.

Yes, there was the graceful figure, in its mourning garments, standing out tall and black and motionless against the leafy background. There was Magdalen herself, with a changeless stillness on her white face; with an icy resignation in her steady grey eyes.

‘We know it already,’ she repeated, in clear, measured tones. ‘Mr. Vanstone’s daughters Eire Nobody’s Children; and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle’s mercy.’

So, without a tear on her cheeks, without a faltering tone in her voice, she repeated the lawyer’s own words, exactly as he had spoken them. Miss Garth staggered back a step, and caught at the bench to support herself. Her head swam; she closed her eyes in a momentary faintness. When they opened again, Magdalen’s arm was supporting her, Magdalen’s breath fanned her cheek, Magdalen’s cold lips kissed her. She drew back from the kiss; the touch of the girl’s lips thrilled her with terror.

As soon as she could speak, she put the inevitable question. ‘You heard us,’ she said. ‘Where?’

‘Under the open window.’

‘All the time?’

‘From beginning to end.’

She had listened—this girl of eighteen, in the first week of her orphanage, had listened to the whole terrible revelation, word by word, as it fell from the lawyer’s lips; and had never once betrayed herself! From first to last, the only movements which had escaped her, had been movements guarded enough and slight enough to be mistaken for the passage of the summer breeze through the leaves!

‘Don’t try to speak yet,’ she said, in softer and gentler tones. ‘Don’t look at me with those doubting eyes. What wrong have I done? When Mr. Pendril wished to speak to you about Norah and me, his letter gave us our choice to be present at the interview, or to keep away. If my elder sister decided to keep away, how could I come? How could I hear my own story, except as I did? My listening has done no harm. It has done good—it has saved you the distress of speaking to us. You have suffered enough for us already; it is time we learnt to suffer for ourselves. I have learnt. And Norah is learning.’

‘Norah!’

‘Yes. I have done all I could to spare you. I have told Norah.’

She had told Norah! Was this girl, whose courage had faced the terrible necessity from which a woman old enough to be her mother had recoiled, the girl Miss Garth had brought up? the girl whose nature she had believed to be as well known to her as her own?

‘Magdalen!’ she cried out passionately, ‘you frighten me!’

Magdalen only sighed, and turned wearily away.

‘Try not to think worse of me than I deserve,’ she said. ‘I can’t cry. My heart is numbed.’

She moved away slowly over the grass. Miss Garth watched the tall black figure gliding away alone, until it was lost among the trees. While it was in sight, she could think of nothing else. The moment it was gone, she thought of Norah. For the first time, in her experience of the sisters, her heart led her instinctively to the elder of the two.

Norah was still in her own room. She was sitting on the couch by the window, with her mother’s old music-book—the keepsake which Mrs. Vanstone had found in her husband’s study, on the day of her husband’s death—spread open on her lap. She looked up from it with such quiet sorrow, and pointed with such ready kindness to the vacant place at her side, that Miss Garth doubted for the moment whether Magdalen had spoken the truth.

‘See,’ said Norah, simply, turning to the first leaf in the music-book. ‘My mother’s name written in it, and some verses to my father on the next page. We may keep this for ourselves, if we keep nothing else.’ She put her arm round Miss Garth’s neck; and a faint tinge of colour stole over her cheeks. ‘I see anxious thoughts in your face,’ she whispered. ‘Are you anxious about me? Are you doubting whether I have heard it? I have heard the whole truth. I might have felt it bitterly, later; it is too soon to feel it now. You have seen Magdalen? She went out to find you—where did you leave her?’

‘In the garden. I couldn’t speak to her; I couldn’t look at her. Magdalen has frightened me.’

Norah rose hurriedly; rose, startled and distressed by Miss Garth’s reply.

‘Don’t think ill of Magdalen,’ she said. ‘Magdalen suffers in secret more than I do. Try not to grieve over what you have heard about us this morning. Does it matter who we are, or what we keep or lose? What loss is there for us, after the loss of our father and mother? Oh, Miss Garth, *there* is the only bitterness! What did we remember of them, when we laid them in the grave yesterday? Nothing but the love they gave us—the love we must never hope for again. What else can we remember to-day? What change can the world, and the world’s cruel laws, make in *our* memory of the kindest father, the kindest mother, that children ever had!’ She stopped: struggled with her rising grief; and quiedy, resolutely, kept it down. ‘Will you wait here?’ she said, ‘while I go and bring Magdalen back? Magdalen was always your favourite: I want her to be your favourite still.’ She laid the music-book gently on Miss Garth’s lap—and left the room.

‘Magdalen was always your favourite.’

Tenderly as they had been spoken, those words fell reproachfully on Miss Garth’s ear. For the first time in the long companionship of her pupils and herself, a doubt whether she, and all those about her, had not been fatally mistaken in their relative estimate of the sisters, now forced itself on her mind.

She had studied the natures of her two pupils in the daily intimacy of twelve years. Those natures, which she believed herself to have sounded through all their depths, had been suddenly tried in the sharp ordeal of affliction. How had they come out from the test? As her previous experience had prepared her to see them? No: in flat contradiction to it.

What did such a result as this imply?

Thoughts came to her, as she asked herself that question, which have startled and saddened us all.

Does there exist in every human being, beneath that outward and visible character which is shaped into form by the social influences surrounding us, an inward, invisible disposition, which is part of ourselves; which education may indirectly modify, but can never hope to change? Is the philosophy which denies this, and asserts that we are bom with dispositions like blank sheets of paper, a philosophy which has failed to remark that we are not bom with blank faces—a philosophy which has never compared together two infants of a few days old, and has never observed that those infants are not born with blank tempers for mothers and nurses to fill up at will? Are there, infinitely varying with each individual, inbred forces of Good and Evil in all of us, deep down below the reach of mortal encouragement and mortal repression—hidden Good and hidden Evil, both alike at the mercy of the liberating opportunity and the sufficient temptation? Within these earthly limits, is earthly Circumstance ever the key; and can no human vigilance warn us beforehand of the forces imprisoned in ourselves which that key *may* unlock?

For the first time, thoughts such as these rose darkly—as shadowy and terrible possibilities—in Miss Garth’s mind. For the first time, she associated those possibilities with the past conduct and characters, with the future

lives and fortunes of the orphan-sisters.

Searching, as in a glass darkly, into the two natures, she felt her way, doubt by doubt, from one possible truth to another. It might be, that the upper surface of their characters was all that she had, thus far, plainly seen in Norah and Magdalen. It might be, that the unalluring secrecy and reserve of one sister, the all-attractive openness and high spirits of the other, were more or less referable, in each case, to those physical causes which work towards the production of moral results. It might be, that under the surface so formed—a surface which there had been nothing, hitherto, in the happy, prosperous, uneventful lives of the sisters to disturb—forces of inborn and inbred disposition had remained concealed, which the shock of the first serious calamity in their lives had now thrown up into view. Was this so? Was the promise of the future shining with prophetic light through the surface-shadow of Norah's reserve; and darkening with prophetic gloom, under the surface-glitter of Magdalen's bright spirits? If the life of the elder sister was destined henceforth to be the ripening ground of the undeveloped Good that was in her—was the life of the younger doomed to be the battle-field of mortal conflict with the roused forces of Evil in herself?

On the brink of that terrible conclusion, Miss Garth shrank back in dismay. Her heart was the heart of a true woman. It accepted the conviction which raised Norah higher in her love: it rejected the doubt which threatened to place Magdalen lower. She rose and paced the room impatiently; she recoiled with an angry suddenness from the whole train of thought in which her mind had been engaged but the moment before. What if there were dangerous elements in the strength of Magdalen's character—was it not her duty to help the girl against herself? How had she performed that duty? She had let herself be governed by first fears and first impressions; she had never waited to consider whether Magdalen's openly acknowledged action of that morning might not imply a self-sacrificing fortitude, which promised, in after-life, the noblest and the most enduring results, She had let Norah go and speak those words of tender remonstrance, which she should first have spoken herself. 'Oh!' she thought bitterly, 'how long I have lived in the world, and how little I have known of my own weakness and wickedness until to-day!'

The door of the room opened. Norah came in, as she had gone out, alone.

'Do you remember leaving anything on the little table by the garden-seat?' she asked, quietly.

Before Miss Garth could answer the question, she held out her father's will, and her father's letter.

'Magdalen came back after you went away,' she said, 'and found these last relics. She heard Mr. Pendril say they were her legacy and mine. When I went into the garden, she was reading the letter. There was no need for me to speak to her; our father had spoken to her from his grave. See how she has listened to him!'

She pointed to the letter. The traces of heavy tear-drops lay thick over the last lines of the dead man's writing.

'Her tears,' said Norah, sofdy.

Miss Garth's head drooped low, over the mute revelation of Magdalen's return to her better self.

'Oh, never doubt her again!' pleaded Norah. 'We are alone, now—we have our hard way through the world to walk on as patiently as we can. If Magdalen ever falters and turns back, help her for the love of old times; help her against herself.'

'With all my heart and strength—as God shall judge me, with the devotion of my whole life!' In those fervent words Miss Garth answered. She took the hand which Norah held out to her, and put it, in sorrow and humility, to her lips. 'Oh, my love, forgive me! I have been miserably blind—I have never valued you as I ought!'

Norah gently checked her before she could say more; gently whispered, ‘Come with me into the garden—come, and help Magdalen to look patiently to the future.’

The future! Who could see the faintest glimmer of it? Who could see anything but the ill-omened figure of Michael Vanstone, posted darkly on the verge of the present time—and closing all the prospect that lay beyond him?

Chapter XV

On the next morning but one, news was received from Mr. Pendril. The place of Michael Vanstone’s residence on the Continent had been discovered. He was living at Zurich; and a letter had been despatched to him, at that place, on the day when the information was obtained. In the course of the coming week an answer might be expected, and the purport of it should be communicated forthwith to the ladies at Combe-Raven.

Short as it was, the interval of delay passed wearily. Ten days elapsed before the expected answer was received; and when it came at last, it proved to be, strictly speaking, no answer at all. Mr. Pendril had been merely referred to an agent in London who was in possession of Michael Vanstone’s instructions. Certain difficulties had been discovered in connection with those instructions, which had produced the necessity of once more writing to Zurich. And there ‘the négociations’ rested again for the present.

A second paragraph in Mr. Pendril’s letter contained another piece of intelligence entirely new. Mr. Michael Vanstone’s son (and only child), Mr. Noel Vanstone, had recently arrived in London, and was then staying in lodgings occupied by his cousin, Mr. George Bartram. Professional considerations had induced Mr. Pendril to pay a visit to the lodgings. He had been very kindly received by Mr. Bartram; but had been informed by that gentleman that his cousin was not then in a condition to receive visitors. Mr. Noel Vanstone had been suffering, for some years past, from a wearing and obstinate malady; he had come to England expressly to obtain the best medical advice, and he still felt the fatigue of the journey so severely as to be confined to his bed. Under these circumstances, Mr. Pendril had no alternative but to take his leave. An interview with Mr. Noel Vanstone might have cleared up some of the difficulties in connection with his father’s instructions. As events had turned out, there was no help for it but to wait for a few days more.

The days passed, the empty days of solitude and suspense. At last, a third letter from the lawyer announced the long-delayed conclusion of the correspondence. The final answer had been received from Zurich; and Mr. Pendril would personally communicate it at Combe-Raven, on the afternoon of the next day.

That next day was Wednesday, the twelfth of August. The weather had changed in the night; and the sun rose watery through mist and cloud. By noon, the sky was overcast at all points; the temperature was sensibly colder; and the rain poured down, straight and soft and steady, on the thirsty earth. Towards three o’clock, Miss Garth and Norah entered the morning-room, to await Mr. Pendril’s arrival. They were joined shortly afterwards by Magdalen. In half an hour more, the familiar fall of the iron latch in the socket, reached their ears from the fence beyond the shrubbery. Mr. Pendril and Mr. Clare advanced into view along the garden-path, walking arm in arm through the rain, sheltered by the same umbrella. The lawyer bowed as they passed the windows; Mr. Clare walked straight on, deep in his own thoughts; noticing nothing.

After a delay which seemed interminable; after a weary scraping of wet feet on the hall mat; after a mysterious, muttered interchange of question and answer outside the door, the two came in—Mr. Clare leading the way. The

old man walked straight up to the table, without any preliminary greeting; and looked across it at the three women, with a stem pity for them, in his rugged wrinkled face.

‘Bad news,’ he said. ‘I am an enemy to all unnecessary suspense. Plainness is kindness in such a case as this. I mean to be kind—and I tell you plainly—bad news.’

Mr. Pendril followed him. He shook hands, in silence, with Miss Garth and the two sisters; and took a seat near them. Mr. Clare placed himself apart on a chair by the window. The grey rainy light fell soft and sad on the faces of Norah and Magdalen, who sat together opposite to him. Miss Garth had placed herself a little behind them, in partial shadow; and the lawyer’s quiet face was seen in profile, dose beside her. So the four occupants of the room appeared to Mr. Clare, as he sat apart in his corner; his long claw-like fingers interlaced on his knee; his dark vigilant eyes fixed searchingly now on one face, now on another. The dripping rustle of the rain among the leaves, and the clear ceaseless tick of the clock on the mantelpiece, made the minute of silence which followed the settling of the persons present in their places, indescribably oppressive. It was a relief to every one, when Mr. Pendril spoke.

‘Mr. Clare has told you already,’ he began, ‘that I am the bearer of bad news. I am grieved to say, Miss Garth, that your doubts, when I last saw you, were better founded than my hopes. What that heartless elder brother was in his youth, he is still in his old age. In all my unhappy experience of the worst side of human nature, I have never met with a man so utterly dead to every consideration of mercy, as Michael Vanstone.’

‘Do you mean that he takes the whole of his brother’s fortune, and makes no provision whatever for his brother’s children?’ asked Miss Garth.

‘He offers a sum of money for present emergencies,’ replied Mr. Pendril, ‘so meanly and disgracefully insufficient, that I am ashamed to mention it.’

‘And nothing for the future?’

‘Absolutely nothing.’

As that answer was given, the same thought passed, at the same moment, through Miss Garth’s mind and through Norah’s. The decision which deprived both the sisters alike of the resources of fortune, did not end there for the younger of the two. Michael Vanstone’s merciless resolution had virtually pronounced the sentence which dismissed Frank to China, and which destroyed all present hope of Magdalen’s marriage. As the words passed the lawyer’s lips, Miss Garth and Norah looked at Magdalen anxiously. Her face turned a shade paler—but not a feature of it moved; not a word escaped her. Norah, who held her sister’s hand in her own, felt it tremble for a moment, and then turn cold—and that was all.

‘Let me mention plainly what I have done,’ resumed Mr. Pendril; ‘I am very desirous you should not think that I have left any effort untried. When I wrote to Michael Vanstone, in the first instance, I did not confine myself to the usual formal statement. I put before him, plainly and earnestly, every one of the circumstances under which he has become possessed of his brother’s fortune. When I received the answer, referring me to his written instructions to his lawyer in London—and when a copy of those instructions was placed in my hands—I positively declined, on becoming acquainted with them, to receive the writer’s decision as final. I induced the solicitor on the other side, to accord us a further term of delay; I attempted to see Mr. Noel Vanstone in London for the purpose of obtaining his intercession; and, failing in that, I myself wrote to his father for the second time. The answer referred me, in insolently curt terms, to the instructions already communicated; declared those instructions to be final; and declined any further correspondence with me. There is the beginning and the end of the négociation. If I have overlooked any means of touching this heartless man—tell me, and those means shall

be tried.'

He looked at Norah. She pressed her sister's hand encouragingly, and answered for both of them.

'I speak for my sister, as well as for myself,' she said, with her colour a little heightened, with her natural gentleness of manner just touched by a quiet, uncomplaining sadness. 'You have done all that could be done, Mr. Pendril. We have tried to restrain ourselves from hoping too confidently; and we are deeply grateful for your kindness, at a time when kindness is sorely needed by both of us.'

Magdalen's hand returned the pressure of her sister's—withdrew itself—trifled for a moment impatiently with the arrangement of her dress—then suddenly moved the chair closer to the table. Leaning one arm on it (with the hand fast clenched), she looked across at Mr. Pendril. Her face, always remarkable for its want of colour, was now startling to contemplate, in its blank bloodless pallor. But the light in her large grey eyes was bright and steady as ever; and her voice, though low in tone, was clear and resolute in accent as she addressed the lawyer in these terms:—

'I understood you to say, Mr. Pendril, that my father's brother had sent his written orders to London, and that you had a copy. Have you preserved it?'

'Certainly.'

'Have you got it about you?'

'I have.'

'May I see it?'

Mr. Pendril hesitated, and looked uneasily from Magdalen to Miss Garth, and from Miss Garth back again to Magdalen.

'Pray oblige me by not pressing your request,' he said. 'It is surely enough that you know the result of the instructions. Why should you agitate yourself to no purpose by reading them? They are expressed so cruelly; they show such abominable want of feeling, that I really cannot prevail upon myself to let you see them.'

'I am sensible of your kindness, Mr. Pendril, in wishing to spare me pain. But I can bear pain; I promise to distress nobody. Will you excuse me if I repeat my request?'

She held out her hand—the soft, white, virgin hand that had touched nothing to soil it or harden it yet.

'Oh, Magdalen, think again!' said Norah.

'You distress Mr. Pendril,' added Miss Garth; 'you distress us all.'

'There can be no end gained,' pleaded the lawyer—'forgive me for saying so—there can really be no useful end gained by my showing you the instructions.'

('Fools!' said Mr. Clare to himself. 'Have they no eyes to see that she means to have her own way?')

'Something tells me there *is* an end to be gained,' persisted Magdalen. 'This decision is a very serious one. It is more serious to me———' She looked round at Mr. Clare, who sat closely watching her, and instantly looked back again, with the first outward betrayal of emotion which had escaped her yet. 'It is even more serious to me,' she resumed, 'for private reasons—than it is to my sister. I know nothing yet, but that our father's brother

has taken our fortunes from us. He must have some motives of his own for such conduct as that. It is not fair to him, or fair to us, to keep those motives concealed. He has deliberately robbed Norah, and robbed me; and I think we have a right, if we wish it, to know why?'

'I don't wish it,' said Norah.

'I do,' said Magdalen; and, once more, she held out her hand.

At this point, Mr. Clare roused himself, and interfered for the first time.

'You have relieved your conscience,' he said, addressing the lawyer. 'Give her the right she claims. It *is* her right—if she will have it.'

M. Pendril quietly took the written instructions from his pocket. 'I have warned you,' he stud—and handed the papers across the table, without another word. One of the pages of writing was folded down at the comer; and, at that folded page, the manuscript opened, when Magdalen first turned the leaves. 'Is this the place which refers to my sister and myself?' she inquired. Mr. Pendril bowed; and Magdalen smoothed out the manuscript before her, on the table.

'Will you decide, Norah?' she asked, turning to her sister. 'Shall I read this aloud, or shall I read it to myself?'

'To yourself,' said Miss Garth; answering for Norah, who looked at her in mute perplexity and distress.

'It shall be as you wish,' said Magdalen. With that reply, she turned again to the manuscript, and read these lines:—

'…You are now in possession of my wishes in relation to the property in money, and to the sale of the furniture, carriages, horses, and so forth. The last point left, on which it is necessary for me to instruct you, refers to the persons inhabiting the house, and to certain preposterous claims on their behalf, set up by a solicitor named Pendril; who has no doubt interested reasons of his own for making application to me.

'I understand that my late brother has left two illegitimate children; both of them young women, who are of an age to earn their own livelihood. Various considerations, aft equally irregular, have been urged in respect to these persons, by the solicitor representing them. Be so good as to tell him that neither you nor I have anything to do with questions of mere sentiment; and then state plainly, for his better information, what the motives are which regulate my conduct, and what the provision is which I feel myself justified in making for the two young women. Your instructions on both these points, you will find detailed in the next paragraph.

'I wish the persons concerned, to know, once for all, how I regard the circumstances which have placed my late brother's property at my disposal. Let them understand that I consider those circumstances to be a Providential interposition, which has restored to me the inheritance that ought always to have been mine.. I receive the money, not only as my right, but also as a proper compensation for the injustice which I suffered from my father, and a proper penalty paid by my younger brother for the vile intrigue by which he succeeded in disinheriting me. His conduct, when a young man, was uniformly discreditable in all the relations of life; and what it then was, it continued to be (on the showing of his own legal representative) after the time when I ceased to hold any communication with him. He appears to have systematically imposed a woman on Society as his wife, who was not his wife; and to have completed the outrage on morality by afterwards marrying her. Such conduct as this, has called down a Judgment on himself and his children. I will not invite retribution on my own head, by assisting those children to continue the imposition which their parents practised, and by helping them to take a place in the world to which they are not entitled. Let them, as becomes their birth, gain their bread in

situations. If they show themselves disposed to accept their proper position, I will assist them to start virtuously in life, by a present of one hundred pounds each. This sum I authorise you to pay them, on their personal application, with the necessary acknowledgment of receipt; and on the express understanding that the transaction, so completed, is to be the beginning and the end of my connection with them. The arrangements under which they quit the house, I leave to your discretion; and I have only to add that my decision on this matter, as on all other matters, is positive and final.'

Line by line—without once looking up from the pages before her—Magdalen read those atrocious sentences through, from beginning to end. The other persons assembled in the room, all eagerly looking at her together, saw the dress rising and falling faster and faster over her bosom—saw the hand in which she lightly held the manuscript at the outset, close unconsciously on the paper, and crush it, as she advanced nearer and nearer to the end—but detected no other outward signs of what was passing within her. As soon as she had done, she silently pushed the manuscript away, and put her hands on a sudden over her face. When she withdrew them, all the four persons in the room noticed a change in her. Something in her expression had altered, subtly and silently; something which made the familiar features suddenly look strange, even to her sister and Miss Garth; something, through all after years, never to be forgotten in connection with that day—and never to be described.

The first words she spoke were addressed to Mr. Pendril.

'May I ask one more favour,' she said, 'before you enter on your business arrangements?'

Mr. Pendril replied ceremoniously by a gesture of assent. Magdalen's resolution to possess herself of the Instructions, did not appear to have produced a favourable impression on the lawyer's mind.

'You mentioned what you were so kind as to do, in our interests, when you first wrote to Mr. Michael Vanstone,' she continued. 'You said you had told him all the circumstances. I want—if you will allow me—to be made quite sure of what he really knew about us when he sent these orders to his lawyer. Did he know that my father had made a will, and that he had left our fortunes to my sister and myself?'

'He did know it,' said Mr. Pendril.

'Did you tell him how it happened that we are left in this helpless position?'

'I told him that your father was entirely unaware, when he married, of the necessity for making another will.'

'And that another will would have been made, after he saw Mr. Clare, but for the dreadful misfortune of his death?'

'He knew that, also.'

'Did he know that my father's untiring goodness and kindness to both of us———'

Her voice faltered for the first time: she sighed, and put her hand to her head wearily. Norah spoke entreatingly to her; Miss Garth spoke entreatingly to her; Mr. Clare sat silent, watching her more and more earnesdy. She answered her sister's remonstrance with a faint smile. 'I will keep my promise,' she said; 'I will distress nobody.' With that reply, she turned again to Mr. Pendril; and steadily reiterated the question—but in another form of words.

'Did Mr. Michael Vanstone know that my father's great anxiety was to make sure of providing for my sister and myself?'

‘He knew it in your father’s own words. I sent him an extract from your father’s last letter to me.’

‘The letter which asked you to come for God’s sake, and relieve him from the dreadful thought that his daughters were unprovided for? The letter which said he should not rest in his grave if he left us disinherited?’

‘That letter and those words.’

She paused, still keeping her eyes steadily fixed on the lawyer’s face.

‘I want to fasten it all in my mind,’ she said, ‘before I go on. Mr. Michael Vanstone knew of the first will; he knew what prevented the making of the second will; he knew of the letter, and he read the words. What did he know of besides? Did you tell him of my mother’s last illness? Did you say that her share in the money would have been left to us, if she could have lifted her dying hand in your presence? Did you try to make him ashamed of the cruel law which calls girls in our situation Nobody’s Children, and which allows him to use us as he is using us now?’

‘I put all those considerations to him. I left none of them doubtful; I left none of them out.’

She slowly reached her hand to the copy of the Instructions; and slowly folded it up again, in the shape in which it had been presented to her. ‘I am much obliged to you, Mr. Pendril.’ With those words, she bowed, and gently pushed the manuscript back across the table; then turned to her sister.

‘Norah,’ she said, ‘if we both of us live to grow old, and if you ever forget all that we owe to Michael Vanstone —come to me, and I will remind you.’

She rose and walked across the room by herself to the window. As she passed Mr. Clare, the old man stretched out his claw-like fingers, and caught her fast by the arm before she was aware of him.

‘What is this mask of yours hiding?’ he asked, forcing her to bend to him, and looking close into her face. ‘Which of the extremes of human temperature does your courage start from—the dead cold or the white hot?’

She shrank back from him; and turned away her head in silence. She would have resented that unscrupulous intrusion on her own thoughts from any man alive but Frank’s father. He dropped her arm as suddenly as he had taken it, and let her go on to the window. ‘No,’ he said to himself, ‘not the cold extreme, whatever else it may be. So much the worse for her, and for all belonging to her.’

There was a momentary pause. Once more the dripping rusde of the rain, and the steady ticking of the clock filled up the gap of silence. Mr. Pendril put the Instructions back in his pocket, considered a little; and, turning towards Norah and Miss Garth, recalled their attention to the present and pressing necessities of the time.

‘Our consultation has been needlessly prolonged,’ he said, ‘by painful references to the past. We shall be better employed in settling our arrangements for the future. I am obliged to return to town this evening. Pray let me hear how I can best assist you; pray tell me what trouble and what responsibility I can take off your hands.’

For the moment, neither Norah nor Miss Garth seemed to be capable of answering him. Magdalen’s reception of the news which annihilated the marriage prospect that her father’s own lips had placed before her not a month since, had bewildered and dismayed them alike. They had summoned their courage to meet the shock of her passionate grief, or to face the harder trial of witnessing her speechless despair. But they were not prepared for her invincible resolution to read the Instructions; for the terrible questions which she had put to the lawyer; for her immovable determination to fix all the circumstances in her mind, under which Michael Vanstone’s decision had been pronounced. There she stood at the window, an unfathomable mystery to the sister who had never

been parted from her, to the governess who had trained her from a child. Miss Garth remembered the dark doubts which had crossed her mind, on the day when she and Magdalen had met in the garden. Norah looked forward to the coming time, with the first serious dread of it on her sister's account, which she had felt yet. Both had hitherto remained passive, in despair of knowing what to do. Both were now silent, in despair of knowing what to say.

Mr. Pendril patiently and kindly helped them, by returning to the subject of their future plans for the second time.

'I am sorry to press any business matters on your attention,' he said, 'when you are necessarily unfitted to deal with them. But I must take my instructions back to London with me to-night. With reference, in the first place, to the disgraceful pecuniary offer, to which I have already alluded. The younger Miss Vanstone having read the Instructions, needs no further information from my lips. The elder will, I hope, excuse me if I tell her (what I should be ashamed to tell her, but that it is a matter of necessity), that Mr. Michael Vanstone's provision for his brother's children, begins and ends with an offer to each of them of one hundred pounds.'

Norah's face crimsoned with indignation. She started to her feet, as if Michael Vanstone had been present in the room, and had personally insulted her.

'I see,' said the lawyer, wishing to spare her; 'I may tell Mr. Michael Vanstone you refuse the money.'

'Tell him,' she broke out passionately, 'if I was starving by the roadside, I wouldn't touch a farthing of it!'

'Shall I notify your refusal also?' asked Mr. Pendril, speaking to Magdalen next.

She turned round from the window—but kept her face in shadow, by standing close against it with her back to the light.

'Tell him, on my part,' she said, 'to think again, before he starts me in life with a hundred pounds. I will give him time to think.' She spoke those strange words, with a marked emphasis; and turning back quickly to the window, hid her face from the observation of every one in the room.

'You both refuse the offer,' said Mr. Pendril, taking out his pencil, and making his professional note of the decision. As he shut up his pocket-book, he glanced towards Magdalen doubtfully. She had roused in him the latent distrust which is a lawyer's second nature: he had his suspicions of her looks; he had his suspicions of her language. Her sister seemed to have more influence over her than Miss Garth. He resolved to speak privately to her sister before he went away.

While the idea was passing through his mind, his attention was claimed by another question from Magdalen.

'Is he an old man?' she asked, suddenly, without turning round from the window.

'If you mean Mr. Michael Vanstone, he is seventy-five, or seventy-six years of age.'

'You spoke of his son, a little while since. Has he any other sons—or daughters?'

'None.'

'Do you know anything of his wife?'

'She has been dead for many years.'

There was a pause. ‘Why do you ask these questions?’ said Norah.

‘I beg your pardon,’ replied Magdalen, quietly; ‘I won’t ask any more.’

For the third time, Mr. Pendril returned to the business of the interview.

‘The servants must not be forgotten,’ he said. ‘They must be settled with and discharged: I will give them the necessary explanation before I leave. As for the house, no questions connected with it need trouble you. The carriage and horses, the furniture and plate, and so on, must simply be left on the premises to await Mr. Michael Vanstone’s further orders. But any possessions, Miss Vanstone, personally belonging to you or to your sister—your jewelry and dresses, and any little presents which may have been made to you—are entirely at your disposal. With regard to the time of your departure, I understand that a month, or more, will elapse before Mr. Michael Vanstone can leave Zurich; and I am sure I only do his solicitor justice in saying———’

‘Excuse me, Mr. Pendril,’ interposed Norah; ‘I think I understand, from what you have just said, that our house and everything in it belongs to———?’ She stopped, as if the mere utterance of the man’s name was abhorrent to her.

‘To Michael Vanstone,’ said Mr. Pendril. ‘The house goes to him with the rest of the property.’

‘Then I, for one, am ready to leave it to-morrow!’

Magdalen started at the window, as her sister spoke, and looked at Mr. Clare, with the first open signs of anxiety and alarm which she had shown yet.

‘Don’t be angry with me,’ she whispered, stooping over the old man with a sudden humility of look, and a sudden nervousness of manner. ‘I can’t go, without seeing Frank first!’

‘You shall see him,’ replied Mr. Clare. ‘I am here to speak to you about it, when the business is done.’

‘It is quite unnecessary to hurry your departure, as you propose,’ continued Mr. Pendril, addressing Norah. ‘I can safely assure you that a week hence will be time enough.’

‘If this is Mr. Michael Vanstone’s house,’ repeated Norah, ‘I am ready to leave it to-morrow.’

She impatiently quitted her chair; and seated herself farther away on the sofa. As she laid her hand on the back of it, her face changed. There, at the head of the sofa, were the cushions which had supported her mother, when she lay down for the last time to repose. There, at the foot of the sofa, was the clumsy, old-fashioned arm-chair, which had been her father’s favourite seat on rainy days, when she and her sister used to amuse him at the piano opposite, by playing his favourite tunes. A heavy sigh, which she tried vainly to repress, burst from her lips. ‘Oh,’ she thought, ‘I had forgotten these old friends! How shall we part from them when the time comes!’

‘May I inquire, Miss Vanstone, whether you and your sister have formed any definite plans for the future?’ asked Mr. Pendril. ‘Have you thought of any place of residence?’

‘I may take it on myself, sir,’ said Miss Garth, ‘to answer your question for them. When they leave this house they leave it with me. My home is their home; and my bread is their bread. Their parents honoured me, trusted me, and loved me. For twelve happy years they never let me remember that I was their governess, they only let me know myself as their companion and their friend. My memory of them is the memory of unvarying gentleness and generosity; and my life shall pay the debt of my gratitude to their orphan children.’

Norah rose hastily from the sofa; Magdalen impetuously left the window. For once, there was no contrast in the

conduct of the sisters. For once, the same impulse moved their hearts, the same earnest feeling inspired their words. Miss Garth waited until the first outburst of emotion had passed away; then rose; and taking Norah and Magdalen each by the hand, addressed herself to Mr. Pendril and Mr. Clare. She spoke with perfect self-possession; strong in her artless unconsciousness of her own good action.

'Even such a trifle as my own story,' she said, 'is of some importance at such a moment as this. I wish you both, gentlemen, to understand that I am not promising more to the daughters of your old friend than I can perform. When I first came to this house, I entered it under such independent circumstances as are not common in the lives of governesses. In my younger days, I was associated in teaching with my elder sister: we established a school in London, which grew to be a large and prosperous one. I only left it and became a private governess, because the heavy responsibility of the school was more them my strength could bear. I left my share in the profits untouched, and I possess a pecuniary interest in our establishment to this day. That is my story, in few words. When we leave this house, I propose that we shall go back to the school in London, which is still prosperously directed by my elder sister. We can live there as quietly as we please, until time has helped us to bear our affliction better than we can bear it now. If Norah's and Magdalen's altered prospects oblige them to earn their own independence, I can help them to earn it, as a gentleman's daughters should. The best families in this land are glad to ask my sister's advice where the interests of their children's home-training are concerned; and I answer, beforehand, for her hearty desire to serve Mr. Vanstone's daughters, as I answer for my own. That is the future which my gratitude to their father and mother, and my love for themselves, now offers to them. If you think my proposal, gentlemen, a fit and fair proposal—and I see in your faces that you do—let us not make the hard necessities of our position harder still, by any useless delay in meeting them at once. Let us do what we must do; let us act on Norah's decision, and leave this house to-morrow. You mentioned the servants, just now, Mr. Pendril: I am ready to call them together in the next room, and to assist you in the settlement of their claims, whenever you please.'

Without waiting for the lawyer's answer, without leaving the sisters time to realize their own terrible situation, she moved at once towards the door. It was her wise resolution to meet the coming trial by doing much, and saying little. Before she could leave the room, Mr. Glare followed, and stopped her on the threshold.

'I never envied a woman's feelings before,' said the old man. 'It may surprise you to hear it; but I envy yours. Wait! I have something more to say. There is an obstacle still left—the everlasting obstacle of Frank. Help me to sweep him off. Take the elder sister along with you and the lawyer; and leave me here to have it out with the younger. I want to see what metal she's really made of.'

While Mr. Clare was addressing these words to Miss Garth, Mr. Pendril had taken the opportunity of speaking to Norah. 'Before I go back to town,' he said, 'I should like to have a word with you in private. From what has passed to-day, Miss Vanstone, I have formed a very high opinion of your discretion; and, as an old friend of your father's, I want to take the freedom of speaking to you about your sister.'

Before Norah could answer, she was summoned, in compliance with Mr. Clare's request, to the conference with the servants. Mr. Pendril followed Miss Garth, as a matter of course. When the three were out in the hall, Mr. Clare re-entered the room, closed the door, and signed peremptorily to Magdalen to take a chair.

She obeyed him in silence. He took a turn up and down the room, with his hands in the side pockets of the long, loose, shapeless coat which he habitually wore.

'How old are you?' he said, stopping suddenly, and speaking to her with the whole breadth of the room between them.

‘I was eighteen last birthday,’ she answered humbly, without looking up at him.

‘You have shown extraordinary courage for a girl of eighteen. Have you got any of that courage left?’

She clasped her hands together, and wrung them hard. A few tears gathered in her eyes, and rolled slowly over her cheeks.

‘I can’t give Frank up,’ she said faintly. ‘You don’t care for me, I know; but you used to care for my father. Will you try to be kind to me for my father’s sake?’

The last words died away in a whisper; she could say no more. Never had she felt the illimitable power which a woman’s love possesses of absorbing into itself every other event, every other joy or sorrow of her life, as she felt it then. Never had she so tenderly associated Frank with the memory of her lost parents, as at that moment. Never had the impenetrable atmosphere of illusion through which women behold the man of their choice—the atmosphere which had blinded her to all that was weak, selfish, and mean in Frank’s nature—surrounded him with a brighter halo than now, when she was pleading with the father for the possession of the son. ‘Oh, don’t ask me to give him up!’ she said, trying to take courage, and shuddering from head to foot. In the next instant, she flew to the opposite extreme, with the suddenness of a flash of lightning. ‘I won’t give him up!’ she burst out violently. ‘No! not if a thousand fathers ask me!’

‘I am one father,’ said Mr. Clare. ‘And I don’t ask you.’

In the first astonishment and delight of hearing those unexpected words, she started to her feet, crossed the room, and tried to throw her arms round his neck. She might as well have attempted to move the house from its foundations. He took her by the shoulders and put her back in her chair. His inexorable eyes looked her into submission; and his lean forefinger shook at her warningly, as if he was quieting a fractious child.

‘Hug Frank,’ he said; ‘don’t hug me. I haven’t done with you yet: when I have, you may shake hands with me, if you like. Wait, and compose yourself.’

He left her. His hands went back into his pockets, and his monotonous march up and down the room began again.

‘Ready?’ he asked, stopping short after a while. She tried to answer. ‘Take two minutes more,’ he said, and resumed his walk with the regularity of clockwork. ‘These are the creatures,’ he thought to himself, ‘into whose keeping men otherwise sensible, give the happiness of their lives. Is there any other object in creation, I wonder, which answers its end as badly as a woman does?’

He stopped before her once more. Her breathing was easier; the dark flush on her face was dying out again.

‘Ready?’ he repeated. ‘Yes; ready at last. Listen to me; and let’s get it over. I don’t ask you to give Frank up. I ask you to wait.’

‘I will wait,’ she said. ‘Patiently, willingly.’

‘Will you make Frank wait?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will you send him to China?’

Her head drooped upon her bosom, and she clasped her hands again, in silence. Mr. Clare saw where the

difficulty lay, and marched straight up to it on the spot.

‘I don’t pretend to enter into your feelings for Frank, or Frank’s for you,’ he said. ‘The subject doesn’t interest me. But I *do* pretend to state two plain truths. It is one plain truth that you can’t be married till you have money enough to pay for the roof that shelters you, the clothes that cover you, and the victuals you eat. It is another plain truth that you can’t find the money; that I can’t find the money; and that Frank’s only chance of finding it, is going to China. If I tell him to go, he’ll sit in a comer and cry. If I insist, he’ll say Yes, and deceive me. If I go a step further, and see him on board ship with my own eyes—he’ll slip off in the pilot’s boat, and sneak back secretly to you. That’s his disposition.’

‘No!’ said Magdalen. ‘It’s not his disposition; it’s his love for Me.’

‘Call it what you like,’ retorted Mr. Clare. ‘Sneak or Sweetheart—he’s too slippery, in either capacity, for my fingers to hold him. My shutting the door won’t keep him from coming back. Your shutting the door will. Have you the courage to shut it? Are you fond enough of him not to stand in his light?’

‘Fond! I would die for him!’

‘Will you send him to China?’

She sighed bitterly.

‘Have a litde pity for me,’ she said. ‘I have lost my father; I have lost my mother; I have lost my fortune—and now I am to lose Frank. You don’t like women, I know; but try to help me with a little pity. I don’t say it’s not for his own interests to send him to China; I only say it’s hard—very, very hard on *me*.’

Mr. Clare had been deaf to her violence, insensible to her caresses, blind to her tears; but under the tough integument of his philosophy, he had a heart—and it answered that hopeless appeal; it felt those touching words.

‘I don’t deny that your case is a hard one,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to make it harder: I only ask you to do in Frank’s interests, what Frank is too weak to do for himself. It’s no fault of yours; it’s no fault of mine—but it’s not the less true, that the fortune you were to have brought him, has changed owners.’

She suddenly looked up, with a furtive light in her eyes, with a threatening smile on her lips.

‘It may change owners again,’ she said.

Mr. Clare saw the alteration in her expression, and heard the tones of her voice. But the words were spoken low; spoken as if to herself—they failed to reach him across the breadth of the room. He stopped instantly in his walk, and asked what she had said.

‘Nothing,’ she answered, turning her head away towards the window, and looking out mechanically at the falling rain. ‘Only my own thoughts.’

Mr. Clare resumed his walk, and returned to his subject.

‘It’s your interest,’ he went on, ‘as well as Frank’s interest, that he should go. He may make money enough to marry you in China; he can’t make it here. If he stops at home, he’ll be the ruin of both of you. He’ll shut his eyes to every consideration of prudence, and pester you to marry him; and when he has carried his point, he will be the first to turn round afterwards, and complain that you’re a burden on him. Hear me out! You’re in love with Frank—I’m not, and I know him. Put you two together often enough; give him time enough to hug, cry, pester, and plead; and I’ll tell you what the end will be—you’ll marry him.’

He had touched the right string at last. It rung back in answer, before he could add another word.

‘You don’t know me,’ she said firmly. ‘You don’t know what I can suffer for Frank’s sake. He shall never marry me, till I can be what my father said I should be—the making of his fortune. He shall take no burden, when he takes me; I promise you that! I’ll be the good angel of Frank’s life; I’ll not go a penniless girl to him, and drag him down.’ She abruptly left her seat, advanced a few steps towards Mr. Clare, and stopped in the middle of the room. Her arms fell helpless on either side of her; and she burst into tears. ‘He shall go,’ she said.—‘If my heart breaks in doing it, I’ll tell him to-morrow that we must say Goodbye!’

Mr. Clare at once advanced to meet her, and held out his hand.

‘I’ll help you,’ he stud. ‘Frank shall hear every word that has passed between us. When he comes to-morrow, he shall know, beforehand, that he comes to say Good-bye.’

She took his hand in both her own—hesitated—looked at him—and pressed it to her bosom. ‘May I ask a favour of you, before you go?’ she said, timidly. He tried to take his hand from her; but she knew her advantage, and held it fast. ‘Suppose there should be some change for the better?’ she went on. ‘Suppose I could come to Frank, as my father said I should come to him———?’

Before she could complete the question, Mr. Clare made a second effort, and withdrew his hand. ‘As your father said you should come to him?’ he repeated, looking at her attentively.

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘Strange things happen sometimes. If strange things happen to *me*, will you let Frank come back before the five years are out?’

What did she mean? Was she clinging desperately to the hope of melting Michael Vanstone’s heart? Mr. Clare could draw no other conclusion from what she had just said to him. At the beginning of the interview, he would have roughly dispelled her delusion. At the end of the interview, he left her compassionately in possession of it.

‘You are hoping against all hope,’ he said; ‘but if it gives you courage, hope on. If this impossible good fortune of yours ever happens, tell me; and Frank shall come back. In the mean time———’

‘In the mean time,’ she interposed sadly, ‘you have my promise.’

Once more, Mr. Clare’s sharp eyes searched her face attentively. i

‘I will trust your promise,’ he said. ‘You shall see Frank to-morrow.’

She went back thoughtfully to her chair, and sat down again in silence. Mr. Clare made for the door, before any formal leave-taking could pass between them. ‘Deep!’ he thought to himself, as he looked back at her before he went out; ‘only eighteen; and too deep for my sounding!’

In the hall, he found Norah, waiting anxiously to hear what had happened.

‘Is it all over?’ she asked. ‘Does Frank go to China?’

‘Be careful how you manage that sister of yours,’ said Mr. Clare, without noticing the question. ‘She has one great misfortune to contend with: she’s not made for the ordinary jog-trot of a woman’s life. I don’t say I can see straight to the end of the good or the evil in her—I only warn you, her future will be no common one.’

An hour later, Mr. Pendril left the house; and, by that night’s post, Miss Garth despatched a letter to her sister in London.

The End of The First Scene

Between the Scenes

Progress of the Story through the Post

Wilkie Collins

I. *From Norah Vanstone to Mr. Pendril*

‘Westmoreland House, Kensington,

‘August 14th, 1846.

‘Dear Mr. Pendril,—

‘The date of this letter will show you that the last of many hard partings is over. We have left Combe-Raven; we have said farewell to home.

‘I have been thinking seriously of what you said to me, on Wednesday, before you went back to town. I entirely agree with you, that Miss Garth is more shaken by all she has gone through for our sakes, than she is herself willing to admit; and that it is my duty, for the future, to spare her all the anxiety that I can, on the subject of my sister and myself. This is very little to do for our dearest friend, for our second mother. Such as it is, I will do it with all my heart.

‘But, forgive me for saying that I am as far as ever from agreeing with you about Magdalen. I am so sensible, in our helpless position, of the importance of your assistance; so anxious to be worthy of the interest of my father’s trusted adviser and oldest friend, that I feel really and truly disappointed with myself for dilfering with you—and yet I do differ. Magdalen is very strange, very unaccountable, to those who don’t know her intimately. I can understand that she has innocently misled you; and that she has presented herself, perhaps, under her least favourable aspect. But, that the clue to her language and her conduct on Wednesday last, is to be found in such a feeling towards the man who has ruined us, as the feeling at which you hinted, is what I cannot and will not believe of my sister. If you knew, as I do, what a noble nature she has, you would not be surprised at this obstinate resistance of mine to your opinion. Will you try to alter it? I don’t mind what Mr. Clare says: he believes in nothing. But I attach a very serious importance to what *you* say; and, kind as I know your motives to be, it distresses me to think you are doing Magdalen an injustice.

‘Having relieved my mind of this confession, I may now come to the proper object of my letter. I promised, if you could not find leisure time to visit us to-day, to write and tell you all that happened after you left us. The day has passed, without our seeing you. So I open my writing-case, and perform my promise.

‘I am sorry to say that three of the women-servants—the housemaid, the kitchenmaid, and even our own maid

(to whom I am sure we have always been kind)—took advantage of your having paid them their wages to pack up and go, as soon as your back was turned. They came to say good-bye with as much ceremony, and as little feeling, as if they were leaving the house under ordinary circumstances. The cook, for all her violent temper, behaved very differently: she sent up a message to say that she would stop and help us to the last. And Thomas (who has never yet been in any other place than ours) spoke so gratefully of my dear father's unvarying kindness to him; and asked so anxiously to be allowed to go on serving us, while his little savings lasted, that Magdalen and I forgot all formal considerations, and both shook hands with him. The poor lad went out of the room crying. I wish him well; I hope he will find a kind master and a good place.

'The long, quiet, rainy evening out of doors—our last evening at Combe-Raven—was a sad trial to us. I think winter-time would have weighed less on our spirits: the drawn curtains, and the bright lamps, and the companionable fires would have helped us. We were only five in the house altogether—after having once been so many! I can't tell you how dreary the grey daylight looked, towards seven o'clock, in the lonely rooms, and on the noiseless staircase. Surely, the prejudice in favour of long summer evenings, is the prejudice of happy people? We did our best. We kept ourselves employed, and Miss Garth helped us. The prospect of preparing for our departure, which had seemed so dreadful earlier in the day, altered into the prospect of a refuge from ourselves, as the evening came on. We each tried at first to pack up in our own rooms—but the loneliness was more than we could bear. We carried all our possessions down stairs, and heaped them on the large dining-table, and so made our preparations together, in the same room. I am sure we have taken nothing away which does not properly belong to us.

'Having already mentioned to you my own conviction that Magdalen was not herself when you saw her on Wednesday, I feel tempted to stop here, and give you an instance in proof of what I say. The little circumstance happened on Wednesday night, just before we went up to our rooms.

'After we had packed our dresses and our birthday presents, our books and our music, we began to sort our letters, which had got confused from being all placed on the table together. Some of my letters were mixed with Magdalen's, and some of hers with mine. Among these last, I found a card, which had been given to my sister early in the year, by an actor who managed an amateur theatrical performance in which she took a part. The man had given her the card, containing his name and address, in the belief that she would be invited to many more amusements of the same kind, and in the hope that she would recommend him as a superintendent on future occasions. I only relate these trifling particulars to show you how little worth keeping such a card could be, in such circumstances as ours. Naturally enough, I threw it away from me across the table, meaning to throw it on the floor. It fell short, close to the place in which Magdalen was sitting. She took it up, looked at it, and immediately declared that she would not have had this perfectly worthless thing destroyed for the world. She was almost angry with me, for having thrown it away; almost angry with Miss Garth for asking what she could possibly want with it! Could there be any plainer proof than this, that our misfortunes—falling so much more heavily on her than on me—have quite unhinged her, and worn her out? Surely her words and looks are not to be interpreted against her, when she is not sufficiently mistress of herself to exert her natural judgment—when she shows the unreasonable petulance of a child on a question which is not of the slightest importance.

'A little after eleven we went upstairs to try if we could get some rest.

'I drew aside the curtain of my window, and looked out. Oh, what a cruel last night it was; no moon, no stars; such deep darkness, that not one of the dear familiar objects in the garden was visible when I looked for them; such deep stillness, that even my own movements about the room almost frightened me! I tried to lie down and sleep, but the sense of loneliness came again, and quite overpowered me. You will say I am old enough, at six-and-twenty, to have exerted more control over myself. I hardly know how it happened, but I stole into

Magdalen's room, just as I used to steal into it, years and years ago, when we were children. She was not in bed; she was sitting with her writing materials before her, thinking. I said I wanted to be with her the last night; and she kissed me, and told me to lie down, and promised soon to follow me. My mind was a little quieted, and I fell asleep. It was daylight when I woke—and the first sight I saw was Magdalen, still sitting in the chair, and still thinking. She had never been to bed; she had not slept all through the night.

' "I shall sleep when we have left Combe-Raven," she said. "I shall be better when it is all over, and I have bid Frank good-bye." She had in her hand our father's will, and the letter he wrote to you; and when she had done speaking, she gave them into my possession. I was the eldest (she said), and those last precious relics ought to be in my keeping. I tried to propose to her that we should divide them; but she shook her head. "I have copied for myself," was her answer, "all that he says of us in the will, and all that he says in the letter." She told me this, and took from her bosom a tiny white silk bag, which she had made in the night, and in which she had put the extracts, so as to keep them always about her. "This tells me in his own words what his last wishes were for both of us," she said; "and this is all I want for the future."

'These are trifles to dwell on; and I am almost surprised at myself for not feeling ashamed to trouble you with them. But, since I have known what your early connection was with my father and mother, I have learnt to think of you (and, I suppose, to write to you) as an old friend. And, besides, I have it so much at heart to change your opinion of Magdalen, that I can't help telling you the smallest things about her which may, in my judgment, end in making you think of her as I do.

'When breakfast-time came (on Thursday morning) we were surprised to find a strange letter on the table. Perhaps, I ought to mention it to you, in case of any future necessity for your interference. It was addressed to Miss Garth, on paper with the deepest mourning border round it; and the writer was the same man who followed us on our way home from a walk, one day last spring—Captain Wragge. His object appears to be, to assert once more his audacious claim to a family connection with my poor mother, under cover of a letter of condolence, which it is an insolence in such a person to have written at all. He expresses as much sympathy—on his discovery of our affliction in the newspaper—as if he had been really intimate with us; and he begs to know, in a postscript (being evidently in total ignorance of all that has really happened), whether it is thought desirable that he should be present, among the other relatives, at the reading of the will! The address he gives, at which letters will reach him for the next fortnight, is, "Post-office, Birmingham." This is all I have to tell you on the subject. Both the letter and the writer seem to me to be equally unworthy of the slightest notice, on our part or on yours.

'After breakfast, Magdalen left us, and went by herself into the morning-room. The weather being still showery, we had arranged that Francis Clare should see her in that room, when he presented himself to take his leave. I was upstairs when he came; and I remained upstairs for more than half an hour afterwards, sadly anxious, as you may well believe, on Magdalen's account.

'At the end of the half-hour, or more, I came downstairs. As I reached the landing, I suddenly heard her voice, raised entreatingly, and calling on him by his name—then loud sobs—then a frightful laughing and screaming, both together, that rang through the house. I instantly ran into the room; and found Magdalen on the sofa in violent hysterics, and Frank standing staring at her, with a lowering angry face, biting his nails.

'I felt so indignant—without knowing plainly why, for I was ignorant of course of what had passed at the interview—that I took Mr. Francis Clare by the shoulders, and pushed him out of the room. I am careful to tell you how I acted towards him, and what led to it; because I understand that he is excessively offended with me, and that he is likely to mention elsewhere, what he calls, my unladylike violence towards him. If he should mention it to you, I am anxious to acknowledge, of my own accord, that I forgot myself—not, I hope you will think, without some provocation.

‘I pushed him into the hall, leaving Magdalen, for the moment, to Miss Garth’s care. Instead of going away, he sat down sulkily on one of the hall chairs. “May I ask the reason of this extraordinary violence?” he inquired, with an injured look. “No,” I said. “You will be good enough to imagine the reason for yourself, and to leave us immediately, if you please.” He sat doggedly in the chair, biting his nails, and considering. “What have I done to be treated in this unfeeling manner?” he asked, after a while. “I can enter into no discussion with you,” I answered; “I can only request you to leave us. If you persist in waiting to see my sister again, I will go to the cottage myself, and appeal to your father.” He got up in a great hurry at those words. “I have been infamously used in this business,” he stud. “All the hardships and thé sacrifices have fallen to my share. I’m the only one among you who has any heart: all the rest are as hard as stones—Magdalen included. In one breath she says she loves me, and in another, she tells me to go to China. What have I done to be treated with this heardess inconsistency? I’m consistent myself—I only want to stop at home—and (what’s the consequence?) you’re all against me!” In that manner, he grumbled his way down the steps, and so I saw the last of him. This was all that passed between us. If he gives you any other account of it, what he says will be false. He made no attempt to return. An hour afterwards, his father came alone to say good-bye. He saw Miss Garth and me, but not Magdalen; and he told us he would take the necessary measures, with your assistance, for having his son properly looked after in London, and seen safely on board the vessel when the time came. It was a short visit, and a sad leave-taking. Even Mr. Clare was sorry, though he tried hard to hide it.

‘We had barely two hours, after Mr. Clare had left us, before it would be time to go. I went back to Magdalen, and found her quieter and better; though terribly pale and exhausted, and oppressed, as I fancied, by thoughts which she could not prevail on herself to communicate. She would tell me nothing then—she has told me nothing since—of what passed between herself and Francis Clare. When I spoke of him angrily (feeling as I did that he had distressed and tortured her, when she ought to have had all the encouragement and comfort from him that man could give), she refused to hear me: she made the kindest allowances, and the sweetest excuses for him; and laid all the blame of the dreadful state in which I had found her, entirely on herself. Was I wrong in telling you that she had a noble nature? And won’t you alter your opinion when you read these lines?

‘We had no friends to come and bid us good-bye; and our few acquaintances were too far from us—perhaps too indifferent about us—to call. We employed the little leisure left, in going over the house together for the last time. We took leave of our old schoolroom, our bedrooms, the room where our mother died, the little study where our father used to settle his accounts and write his letters—feeling towards them, in our forlorn situation, as other girls might have felt at parting with old friends. From the house, in a gleam of fine weather, we went into the garden, and gathered our last nosegay; with the purpose of drying the flowers when they begin to wither, and keeping them in remembrance of the happy days that are gone. When we had said good-bye to the garden, there was only half an hour left. We went together to the grave; we knelt down, side by side, in silence, and kissed the sacred ground. I thought my heart would have broken. August was the month of my mother’s birthday; and, this time last year, my father and Magdalen and I were áll consulting in secret what present we could make to surprise her with on the birthday morning.

‘If you had seen how Magdalen suffered, you would never doubt her again. I had to take her from the last resting-place of our father and mother, almost by force. Before we were out of the churchyard, she broke from me, and ran back. She dropped on her knees at the grave; tore up from it passionately a handful of grass; and said something to herself, at the same moment, which, though I followed her instantly, I did not get near enough to hear. She turned on me in such a frenzied manner, when I tried to raise her from the ground—she looked at me with such a fearful wildness in her eyes—that I felt absolutely terrified at the sight of her. To my relief, the paroxysm left her as suddenly as it had come. She thrust away the tuft of grass into the bosom of her dress, and took my arm and hurried with me out of the churchyard. I asked her why she had gone back—I asked what those words were, which she had spoken at the grave. “A promise to our dead father,” she answered, with a

momentary return of the wild look and the frenzied manner which had startled me already. I was afraid to agitate her by saying more; I left all other questions to be asked at a fitter and a quieter time. You will understand from this, how terribly she suffers, how wildly and strangely she acts under violent agitation; and you will not interpret against her what she said or did, when you saw her on Wednesday last.

'We only returned to the house, in time to hasten away from it to the train. Perhaps, it was better for us so—better that we had only a moment left to look back, before the turn in the road hid the last of Combe-Raven from our view. There was not a soul we knew at the station; nobody to stare at us, nobody to wish us good-bye. The rain came on again, as we took our seats in the train. What we felt at the sight of the railway; what horrible remembrances it forced on our minds of the calamity which has made us fatherless—I cannot, and dare not, tell you. I have tried anxiously not to write this letter in a gloomy tone; not to return all your kindness to us by distressing you with our grief. Perhaps I have dwelt too long already on the little story of our parting from home? I can only say in excuse, that my heart is full of it; and what is not in my heart my pen won't write.

'We have been so short a time in our new abode, that I have nothing more to tell you—except that Miss Garth's sister has received us with the heartiest kindness. She considerately leaves us to ourselves, until we are fitter than we are now to think of our future plans, and to arrange as we best can for earning our own living. The house is so large, and the position of our rooms has been so thoughtfully chosen, that I should hardly know—except when I hear the laughing of the younger girls in the garden—that we were living in a school.

'With kindest and best wishes from Miss Garth and my sister, believe me, dear Mr. Pendril, gratefully yours,

'Norah Vanstone.'

II. *From Miss Garth to Mr. Pendril*

'Westmoreland House, Kensington,

'September 23rd, 1846.

'My Dear Sir,—

'I write these lines in such misery of mind as no words can describe. Magdalen has deserted us. At an early hour this morning, she secretly left the house; and she has not been heard of since.

'I would come and speak to you personally; but I dare not leave Norah. I must try to control myself; I must try to write.

'Nothing happened yesterday, to prepare me, or to prepare Norah, for this last—I had almost said, this worst—of all our afflictions. The only alteration we either of us noticed in the unhappy girl, was an alteration for the better when we parted for the night. She kissed me, which she has not done latterly; and she burst out crying, when she embraced her sister next. We had so little suspicion of the truth, that we thought these signs of renewed tenderness and affection, a promise of better things for the future.

'This morning, when her sister went into her room, it was empty, and a note in her handwriting, addressed to Norah, was lying on the dressing-table. I cannot prevail on Norah to part with the note; I can only send you the enclosed copy of it. You will see that it affords no clue to the direction she has taken.

‘Knowing the value of time, in this dreadful emergency, I examined her room, and (with my sister’s help) questioned the servants, immediately on the news of her absence reaching me. Her wardrobe was empty; and all her boxes but one, which she has evidently taken away with her, are empty too. We are of opinion that she has privately turned her dresses and jewelry into money; that she had the one trunk she took with her, removed from the house yesterday; and that she left us this morning, on foot. The answers given by one of the servants are so unsatisfactory, that we believe the woman has been bribed to assist her; and has managed all those arrangements for her flight, which she could not have safely undertaken by herself.

‘Of the immediate object with which she has left us, I entertain no doubt.

‘I have reasons (which I can tell you at a fitter time) for feeling assured that she has gone away, with the intention of trying her fortune on the stage. She has in her possession the card of an actor by profession, who superintended an amateur theatrical performance at Clifton, in which she took part; and to him she has gone to help her. I saw the card at the time; and I know the actor’s name to be Huxtable. The address, I cannot call to mind quite so correctly; but I am almost sure it was at some theatrical place, in Bow Street, Covent Garden. Let me entreat you not to lose a moment in sending to make the necessary inquiries; the first trace of her will, I firmly believe, be found at that address.

‘If we had nothing worse to dread than her attempting to go on the stage, I should not feel the distress and dismay which now overpower me. Hundreds of other girls have acted as recklessly as she has acted, and have not ended ill after all. But my fears for Magdalen do not begin and end with the risk she is running at present.

‘There has been something weighing on her mind ever since we left Combe-Raven—weighing far more heavily for the last six weeks than at first. Until the period when Francis Clare left England, I am persuaded she was secretly sustained by the hope that he would contrive to see her again. From the day when she knew that the measures you had taken for preventing this had succeeded; from the day when she was assured that the ship had really taken him away, nothing has roused, nothing has interested her. She has given herself up, more and more hopelessly, to her own brooding thoughts; thoughts which I believe first entered her mind, on the day when the utter ruin of the prospects on which her marriage depended was made known to her. She has formed some desperate project of contesting the possession of her father’s fortune with Michael Vanstone; and the stage career which she has gone away to try, is nothing more than a means of freeing herself from all home-dependence, and of enabling her to run what mad risks she pleases, in perfect security from all home-control. What it costs me to write of her in these terms, I must leave you to imagine. The time has gone by when any consideration of distress to my own feelings can weigh with me. Whatever I can say which will open your eyes to the real danger, and strengthen your conviction of the instant necessity of averting it, I say in despite of myself, without hesitation and without reserve.

‘One word more, and I have done.

‘The last time you were so good as to come to this house, do you remember how Magdalen embarrassed and distressed us, by questioning you about her right to bear her father’s name? Do you remember her persisting in her inquiries, until she had forced you to acknowledge that, legally speaking, she and her sister had No Name?* I venture to remind you of this, because you have the affairs of hundreds of clients to think of, and you might well have forgotten the circumstance. Whatever natural reluctance she might otherwise have had to deceiving us, and degrading herself, by the use of an assumed name, that conversation with you is certain to have removed. We must discover her, by personal description—we can trace her in no other way.

‘I can think of nothing more to guide your decision in our deplorable emergency. For God’s sake, let no expense and no efforts be spared. My letter ought to reach you by ten o’clock this morning, at the latest. Let me have one

line in answer, to say you will act instantly for the best. My only hope of quieting Norah is to show her a word of encouragement from your pen. Believe me, dear sir, yours sincerely and obliged,

‘Harriet Garth.’

III. *From Magdalen to Norah (enclosed in the preceding letter)*

‘My Darling,—

‘Try to forgive me. I have struggled against myself, till I am worn out in the effort. I am the wretchedest of living creatures. Our quiet life here, maddens me; I can bear it no longer, I must go. If you knew what my thoughts are; if you knew how hard I have fought against them, and how horribly they have gone on haunting me in the lonely quiet of this house, you would pity and forgive me. Oh, my love, don’t feel hurt at my not opening my heart to you as I ought! I dare not open it. I dare not show myself to you as I really am.

‘Pray don’t send and seek after me; I will write and relieve all your anxieties. You know, Norah, we must get our living for ourselves; I have only gone to get mine in the manner which is fittest for me. Whether I succeed, or whether I fail, I can do myself no harm, either way. I have no position to lose, and no name to degrade. Don’t doubt I love you—don’t let Miss Garth doubt my gratitude. I go away miserable at leaving you; but I must go. If I had loved you less dearly, I might have had the courage to say this in your presence—but how could I trust myself to resist your persuasions, and to bear the sight of your distress? Farewell, my darling! Take a thousand kisses from me, my own best dearest love, till we meet again.

‘Magdalen.’

IV. *From Sergeant Buhner (of the Detective Police) to Mr. Pendril*

‘Scotland Yard,

‘September 29th, 1846.

‘Sir,—

‘Your clerk informs me that the parties interested in our inquiry after the missing young lady, are anxious for news of the same. I went to your office to speak to you about the matter to-day. Not having found you, and not being able to return and try again to-morrow, I write these lines to save delay, and to tell you how we stand thus far.

‘I am sorry to say, no advance has been made since my former report. The trace of the young lady which we found nearly a week since, still remains the last trace discovered of her. This case seems a mighty simple one looked at from a distance. Looked at close, it alters very considerably for the worse, and becomes, to speak the

plain truth—a Poser.

‘This is how we now stand:

‘We have traced the young lady to the theatrical agent’s in Bow Street. We know that at an early hour on the morning of the twenty-third, the agent was called down stairs, while he was dressing, to speak to a young lady in a cab at the door. We know that, on her production of Mr. Huxtable’s card, he wrote on it Mr. Huxtable’s address in the country, and heard her order the cabman to drive to the Great Northern terminus.* We believe she left by the nine o’clock train. We followed her by the twelve o’clock train. We have ascertained that she called, at half-past two, at Mr. Huxtable’s lodgings; that she found he was away, and not expected back till eight in the evening; that she left word she would call again at eight; and that she never returned. Mr. Huxtable’s statement is—he and the young lady have never set eyes on each other. The first consideration which follows, is this:—Are we to believe Mr. Hux-table? I have carefully inquired into his character; I know as much, or more, about him than he knows about himself; and my opinion is, that we *are* to believe him. To the best of my knowledge, he is a perfectly honest man.

‘Here, then, is the hitch in the case. The young lady sets out with a certain object before her. Instead of going on to the accomplishment of that object, she stops short of it. Why has she stopped? and where? Those are, unfortunately, just the questions which we can’t answer yet.

‘My own opinion of the matter is briefly as follows:—I don’t think she has met with any serious accident. Serious accidents in nine cases out of ten, discover themselves. My own notion is, that she has fallen into the hands of some person or persons, interested in hiding her away, and sharp enough to know how to set about it. Whether she is in their charge, with or without her own consent, is more than I can undertake to say at present. I don’t wish to raise false hopes or false fears; I wish to stop short at the opinion I have given already.

‘In regard to the future, I may tell you that I have left one of my men in daily communication with the authorities. I have also taken care to have the handbills offering a reward for the discovery of her, widely circulated. Lastly, I have completed the necessary arrangements for seeing the playbills of all country theatres, and for having the dramatic companies well looked after. Some years since, this would have cost a serious expenditure of time and money. Luckily for our purpose, the country theatres are in a bad way.* Excepting the large cities, hardly one of them is open; and we can keep our eye on them, with little expense and less difficulty.

‘These are the steps which I think it needful to take at present. If you are of another opinion, you have only to give me your directions, and I will carefully attend to the same. I don’t by any means despair of our finding the young lady, and bringing her back to her friends safe and well. Please to tell them so; and allow me to subscribe myself, yours respectfully,

‘Abraham Bulmer.’

V. *Anonymous Letter addressed to Mr. Pendril*

‘Sir,—

‘A word to the wise. The friends of a certain young lady are wasting time and money to no purpose. Your confidential clerk and your detective policeman are looking for a needle in a bottle of hay.* This is the ninth of October, and they have not found her yet: they will as soon find the North-West Passage.* Call your dogs off;

and you may hear of the young lady's safety under her own hand. The longer you look for her, the longer she will remain, what she is now—lost.'

[The preceding letter is thus endorsed, in Mr. Pendril's handwriting:—'No apparent means of tracing the enclosed to its source. Post-mark, "Charing Cross." Stationer's stamp cut off the inside of the envelope. Handwriting, probably a man's, in disguise. Writer, whoever he is, correctly informed. No further trace of the younger Miss Vanstone discovered yet.']

The Second Scene

Skeldergate, York

Wilkie Collins

Chapter I

In that part of the city of York, which is situated on the western bank of the Ouse, there is a narrow street, called Skeldergate, running nearly north and south, parallel with the course of the river. The postern by which Skeldergate was formerly approached, no longer exists; and the few old houses left in the street, are disguised in melancholy modem costume of whitewash and cement. Shops of the smaller and poorer order, intermixed here and there with dingy warehouses and joyless private residences of red brick, compose the present aspect of Skeldergate. On the riverside the houses are separated, at intervals, by lanes running down to the water, and disclosing lonely little plots of open ground, with the masts of sailing barges rising beyond. At its southward extremity, the street ceases on a sudden, and the broad flow of the Ouse, the trees, the meadows, the public-walk on one bank and the towing-path on the other, open to view.

Here, where the street ends, and on the side of it farthest from the river, a narrow litde lane leads up to the paved footway surmounting the ancient Walls of York. The one small row of buildings, which is all that the lane possesses, is composed of cheap lodging-houses, with an opposite view, at the distance of a few feet, of a portion of the massive city wall. This place is called Rosemary Lane. Very litde light enters it; very few people live in it; the floating population of Skeldergate passes it by; and visitors to the Walk on the Walls, who use it as the way up or the way down, get out of the dreary little passage as fast as they can.

The door of one of the houses in this lost corner of York, opened softly on the evening of the twenty-third of September, eighteen hundred and forty-six; and a solitary individual of the male sex sauntered into Skeldergate from the seclusion of Rosemary Lane.

Turning northward, this person directed his steps towards the bridge over the Ouse and the busy centre of the city. He bore the external appearance of respectable poverty; he carried a gingham umbrella, preserved in an oilskin case; he picked his steps, with the neatest avoidance of all dirty places on the pavement; and he surveyed the scene around him with eyes of two different colours—a bilious brown eye on the look out for employment, and a bilious green eye in a similar predicament. In plainer terms, the stranger from Rosemary Lane was no other than—Captain Wragge.

Outwardly speaking, the captain had not altered for die better, since the memorable spring day when he had presented himself to Miss Garth at the lodge-gate at Combe-Raven. The railway mania of that famous year* had attacked even the wary Wragge; had withdrawn him from his customary pursuits; and had left him prostrate in

the end, like many a better man. He had lost his clerical appearance—he had faded with the autumn leaves. His crape hat-band had put itself in brown mourning for its own bereavement of black. His dingy white collar and cravat had died the death of old linen, and had gone to their long home at the paper-maker's, to live again one day in quires at a stationer's shop. A grey shooting-jacket in the last stage of woollen atrophy, replaced the black frock-coat of former times, and, like a faithful servant, kept the dark secret of its master's linen from the eyes of a prying world. From top to toe, every square inch of the captain's clothing was altered for the worse; but the man himself remained unchanged—superior to all forms of moral mildew, impervious to the action of social rust. He was as courteous, as persuasive, as blandly dignified as ever. He carried his head as high without a shirt collar as ever he had carried it with one. The threadbare black handkerchief round his neck, was perfectly tied; his rotten old shoes were neatly blacked; he might have compared chins, in the matter of smooth shaving, with the highest church dignitary in York. Time, change, and poverty, had all attacked the captain together; and had all failed alike to get him down on the ground. He paced the streets of York, a man superior, to clothes and circumstances; his vagabond varnish as bright on him as ever.

Arrived at the bridge, Captain Wragge stopped, and looked idly over the parapet at the barges in the river. It was plainly evident that he had no particular destination to reach, and nothing whatever to do. While he was still loitering, the clock of York Minster chimed the half-hour past five. Cabs rattled by him over the bridge on their way to meet the train from London, at twenty minutes to six. After a moment's hesitation, the captain sauntered after the cabs. When it is one of a man's regular habits to live upon his fellow-creatures, that man is always more or less fond of haunting large railway stations. Captain Wragge gleaned the human field; and on that unoccupied afternoon, the York terminus was as likely a corner to look about in as any other.

He reached the platform a few minutes after the train had arrived. That entire incapability of devising administrative measures for the management of large crowds, which is one of the national characteristics of Englishmen in authority, is nowhere more strikingly exemplified than at York. Three different lines of railway assemble three passenger mobs, from morning to night, under one roof; and leave them to raise a travellers' riot, with all the assistance which the bewildered servants of the company can render to increase the confusion. The customary disturbance was rising to its climax as Captain Wragge approached the platform. Dozens of different people were trying to attain dozens of different objects, in dozens of different directions, all starting from the same common point, and all equally deprived of the means of information. A sudden parting of the crowd, near the second-class carriages, attracted the captain's curiosity. He pushed his way in; and found a decently-dressed man—assisted by a porter and a policeman—attempting to pick up some printed bills scattered from a paper parcel, which his frenzied fellow-passengers had knocked out of his hand.

Offering his assistance in this emergency, with the polite alacrity which marked his character, Captain Wragge observed the three startling words, 'Fifty Pounds Reward,' printed in capital letters on the bills which he assisted in recovering; and instantly secreted one of them, to be more closely examined at the first convenient opportunity. As he crumpled up the bill in the palm of his hand, his particoloured eyes fixed with hungry interest on the proprietor of the unlucky parcel. When a man happens not to be possessed of fifty pence in his own pocket, if his heart is in the right place, it bounds, if his mouth is properly constituted, it waters, at the sight of another man who carries about with him a printed offer of fifty pounds sterling, addressed to his fellow-creatures.

The unfortunate traveller wrapped up his parcel as he best might, and made his way off the platform; after addressing an inquiry to the first official victim of the day's passenger-traffic, who was sufficiently in possession of his senses to listen to it. Leaving the station for the river-side, which was close at hand, the stranger entered the ferry-boat at the North Street Postern.* The captain, who had carefully dogged his steps thus far, entered the boat also; and employed the short interval of transit to the opposite bank, in a perusal of the handbill which he

had kept for his own private enlightenment. With his back carefully turned on the traveller, Captain Wragge now possessed his mind of the following lines:—

‘Fifty Pounds Reward

‘Left her home, in London, early on the morning of September 23rd, 1846, A Young Lady. Age—eighteen. Dress—deep mourning. Personal appearance—hair of a very light brown; eyebrows and eyelashes darker; eyes light grey; complexion strikingly pale; lower part of her face large and full; tall upright figure; walks with remarkable grace and ease; speaks with openness and resolution; has the manners and habits of a refined, cultivated lady. Personal marks—two little moles, close together, on the left side of the neck. Mark on the under clothing—“Magdalen Vanstone.” Is supposed to have joined, or attempted to join, under an assumed name, a theatrical company now performing at York. Had, when she left London, one black box, and no other luggage. Whoever will give such information as will restore her to her friends, shall receive the above Reward. Apply at the office of Mr. Harkness, solicitor, Coney Street, York. Or to Messrs. Wyatt, Pendril, and Gwilt, Serle Street, Lincoln’s Inn, London.’

Accustomed as Captain Wragge was to keep the completest possession of himself, in all human emergencies, his own profound astonishment, when the course of his reading brought him to the mark on the linen of the missing young lady, betrayed him into an exclamation of surprise which even startled the ferryman. The traveller was less observant; his whole attention was fixed on the opposite bank of the river, and he left the boat hastily, the moment it touched the landing-place. Captain Wragge recovered himself, pocketed the handbill, and followed his leader for the second time.

The stranger directed his steps to the nearest street which ran down to the river; compared a note in his pocket-book with the numbers of the houses on the left-hand side, stopped at one of them, and rang the bell. The captain went on to the next house; affected to ring the bell, in his turn; and stood with his back to the traveller—in appearance, waiting to be let in; in reality, listening with all his might for any scraps of dialogue which might reach his ears on the opening of the door behind him.

The door was answered with all due alacrity, and a sufficiently instructive interchange of question and answer on the threshold, rewarded the dexterity of Captain Wragge.

‘Does Mr. Huxtable live here?’ asked the traveller.

‘Yes, sir,’ was the answer, in a woman’s voice.

‘Is he at home?’

‘Not at home, now, sir; but he will be in again at eight to-night.’

‘I think a young lady called here early in the day, did she not?’

‘Yes; a young lady came this afternoon.’

‘Exactly; I come on the same business. Did she see Mr. Huxtable?’

‘No, sir; he has been away all day. The young lady told me she would come back at eight o’clock.’

‘Just so. I will call and see Mr. Huxtable at the same time.’

‘Any name, sir?’

‘No; say a gentleman called on theatrical business—that will be enough. Wait one minute, if you please. I am a stranger in York; will you kindly tell me which is the way to Coney Street?’

The woman gave the required information; the door closed, and the stranger hastened away in the direction of Coney Street.

On this occasion, Captain Wragge made no attempt to follow him. The handbill revealed plainly enough that the man’s next object was to complete the necessary arrangements with the local solicitor, on the subject of the promised reward.

Having seen and heard enough for his immediate purpose, the captain retraced his steps down the street, turned to the right, and entered on the Esplanade, which, in that quarter of the city, borders the river-side between the swimming-baths and Lendal Tower. ‘This is a family matter,’ said Captain Wragge to himself, persisting, from sheer force of habit, in the old assertion of his relationship to Magdalen’s mother; ‘I must consider it in all its bearings.’ He tucked the umbrella under his arm, crossed his hands behind him, and lowered himself gently into the abyss of his own reflections. The order and propriety observable in the captain’s shabby garments, accurately typified the order and propriety which distinguished the operations of the captain’s mind. It was his habit always to see his way before him through a neat succession of alternatives—and so he saw it now.

Three courses were open to him in connection with the remarkable discovery which he had just made. The first course was to do nothing in the matter at all. Inadmissible, on family grounds: equally inadmissible on pecuniary grounds: rejected accordingly. The second course was to deserve the gratitude of the young lady’s friends, rated at fifty pounds. The third course was by a timely warning, to deserve the gratitude of the young lady herself, rated—at an unknown figure. Between these two last alternatives, the wary Wragge hesitated; not from doubt of Magdalen’s pecuniary resources, for he was totally ignorant of the circumstances which had deprived the sisters of their inheritance—but from doubt whether an obstacle, in the shape of an undiscovered gendeman, might not be privately connected with her disappearance from home. After mature reflection, he determined to pause, and be guided by circumstances. In the mean time, the first consideration was to be beforehand with the messenger from London, and to lay hands securely on the young lady herself.

‘I feel for this misguided girl,’ mused the captain, solemnly strutting backwards and forwards by the lonely riverside. ‘I always have looked upon her—I always shall look upon her—in the light of a niece.’

Where was the adopted relative at that moment? In other words, how was a young lady, in Magdalen’s critical position, likely to while away the hours until Mr. Huxtable’s return? If there was an obstructive gentleman in the background, it would be mere waste of time to pursue the question. But if the inference which the handbill suggested was correct—if she was really alone, at that moment, in the city of York—where was she likely to be?

Not in the crowded thoroughfares, to begin with. Not viewing the objects of interest in the Minster, for it was now past the hour at which the cathedral could be seen. Was she in the waiting-room at the railway? She would hardly run that risk. Was she in one of the hotels? Doubtful, considering that she was entirely by herself. In a pastrycook’s shop? Far more likely. Driving about in a cab? Possible, certainly; but no more. Loitering away the time in some quiet locality, out of doors? Likely enough, again, on that fine autumn evening. The captain paused, weighed the relative claims on his attention of the quiet locality and the pastrycook’s shop; and decided for the first of the two. There was time enough to find her at the pastrycook’s, to inquire after her at the principal hotels, or, finally, to intercept her in Mr. Huxtable’s immediate neighbourhood, from seven to eight. While the

light lasted, the wise course was to use it in looking for her out of doors. Where? The Esplanade was a quiet locality; but she was not there—not on the lonely road beyond, which ran back by the Abbey Wall. Where, next? The captain stopped, looked across the river, brightened under the influence of a new idea, and suddenly hastened back to the ferry.

'The Walk on the Walls,' thought this judicious man, with a twinkle of his parti-coloured eyes. 'The quietest place in York: and the place that every stranger goes to see.'

In ten minutes more, Captain Wragge was exploring the new field of search. He mounted to the walls (which enclose the whole western portion of the city) by the North Street Postern, from which the walk winds round, until it ends again at its southemly extremity, in the narrow passage of Rosemary Lane. It was then twenty minutes to seven. The sun had set more than half an hour since; the red light lay broad and low in the cloudless western heaven; all visible objects were softening in the tender twilight, but were not darkening yet. The first few lamps lit in the street below, looked like faint little specks of yellow light, as the captain started on his walk through one of the most striking scenes which England can show.

On his right hand, as he set forth, stretched the open country beyond the walls—the rich green meadows, the boundary trees dividing them, the broad windings of the river in the distance, the scattered buildings nearer to view; all wrapped in the evening stillness, all made beautiful by the evening peace. On his left hand, the majestic west front of York Minster soared over the city, and caught the last brightest light of heaven on the summits of its lofty towers. Had this noble prospect tempted the lost girl to linger and look at it? No; thus far, not a sign of her. The captain looked round him attentively, and walked on.

He reached the spot where the iron course of the railroad strikes its way through arches in the old wall. He paused at this place—where the central activity of a great railway enterprise beats with all the pulses of its loud-clanging life, side by side with the dead majesty of the past, deep under the old historic stones which tell of fortified York and the sieges of two centuries since—he stood on this spot, and searched for her again, and searched in vain. Others were looking idly down at the desolate activity on the wilderness of the iron rails; but she was not among them. The captain glanced doubtfully at the darkening sky, and walked on.

He stopped again, where the postern of Micklegate still stands, and still strengthens the city wall as of old. Here, the paved walk descends a few steps, passes through the dark stone guard-room of the ancient gate, ascends again, and continues its course southward until the walls reach the river once more. He paused, and peered anxiously into the dim inner comers of the old guard-room. Was she waiting there for the darkness to come, and hide her from prying eyes? No: a solitary workman loitered through the stone chamber; but no other living creature stirred in the place. The captain mounted the steps which led out from the postern, and walked on.

He advanced some fifty or sixty yards along the paved footway; the outlying suburbs of York on one side of him, a rope-walk* and some patches of kitchen garden occupying a vacant strip of ground, on the other. He advanced with eager eyes and quickened step—for he saw before him the lonely figure of a woman, standing by the parapet of the wall, with her face set towards the westward view. He approached cautiously, to make sure of her before she turned and observed him. There was no mistaking that tall dark figure, as it rested against the parapet with a lisdess grace. There she stood, in her long black cloak and gown, the last dim tight of evening falling tenderly on her pale resolute young face. There she stood—not three months since the spoilt darting of her parents; the priceless treasure of the household, never left unprotected, never trusted alone—there she stood in the lovely dawn of her womanhood, a castaway in a strange city, wrecked on the world!

Vagabond as he was, the first sight of her staggered even the daundess assurance of Captain Wragge. As she slowly turned her face and looked at him, he raised his hat, with the nearest approach to respect which a long

life of unblushing audacity had left him capable of making.

‘I think I have the honour of addressing the younger Miss Vanstone?’ he began. ‘Deeply gratified, I am sure—for more reasons than one.’

She looked at him with a cold surprise. No recollection of the day when he had followed her sister and herself on their way home with Miss Garth, rose in her memory, while he now confronted her, with his altered manner and his altered dress.

‘You are mistaken,’ she said, quiedy. ‘You are a perfect stranger to me.’

‘Pardon me,’ replied the captain; ‘I am a species of relation. I had the pleasure of seeing you in the spring of the present year. I presented myself on that memorable occasion to an honoured preceptress in your late father’s family. Permit me, under equally agreeable circumstances to present myself to *you*. My name is Wragge.’

By this time he had recovered complete possession of his own impudence; his parti-coloured eyes twinkled cheerfully, and he accompanied his modest announcement of himself with a dancing-master’s bow.

Magdalen frowned, and drew back a step. The captain was not a man to be daunted by a cold reception. He tucked his umbrella under his arm, and jocosely spelt his name for her further enlightenment, ‘w, R, A, double G, E—Wragge,’ stud the captain, ticking off the letters persuasively on his fingers.

‘I remember your name,’ said Magdalen. ‘Excuse me for leaving you abruptly. I have an engagement.’

She tried to pass him, and walk on northwards towards the railway. He instantly met the attempt by raising both hands, and displaying a pair of darned black gloves outspread in polite protest.

‘Not that way,’ he said; ‘not that way, Miss Vanstone, I beg and entreat!’

‘Why not?’ she asked haughtily.

‘Because,’ answered the captain, ‘that is the way which leads to Mr. Huxtable’s.’

In the ungovernable astonishment of hearing his reply, she suddenly bent forward, and, for the first time, looked him close in the face. He sustained her suspicious scrutiny, with every appearance of feeling highly gratified by it. ‘h, u, x—Hux,’ said the captain, playfully turning to the old joke; ‘t, a—ta, Huxta; b, l, e—ble; Huxtable.’

‘What do you know about Mr. Huxtable?’ she asked. ‘What do you mean by mentioning him to me?’

The captain’s curly lip took a new twist upwards. He immediately replied, to the best practical purpose, by producing the handbill from his pocket.

‘There is just light enough left,’ he said, ‘for young (and lovely) eyes to read by. Before I enter upon the personal statement which your flattering inquiry claims from me, pray bestow a moment’s attention on this Document.’

She took the handbill from him. By the last gleam of twilight, she read the lines which set a price on her recovery—which published the description of her in pitiless print, like the description of a strayed dog. No tender consideration had prepared her for the shock, no kind word softened it to her when it came. The vagabond whose cunning eyes watched her eagerly while she read, knew no more that the handbill which he had stolen, had only been prepared in anticipation of the worst, and was only to be publicly used in the event of all more considerate means of tracing her being tried in vain—than she knew it. The bill dropped from her hand;

her face flushed deeply. She turned away from Captain Wragge, as if all idea of his existence had passed out of her mind.

‘Oh, Norah, Norah!’ she said to herself, sorrowfully. ‘After the letter I wrote you—after the hard struggle I had to go away! Oh, Norah, Norah!’

‘How is Norah?’ inquired the captain, with the utmost politeness.

She turned upon him with an angry brightness in her large grey eyes. ‘Is this thing shown publicly?’ she asked, stamping her foot on it. ‘Is the mark on my neck described all over York?’

‘Pray compose yourself,’ pleaded the persuasive Wragge. ‘At present I have every reason to believe that you have just perused the only copy in circulation. Allow me to pick it up.’

Before he could touch the bill, she snatched it from the pavement, tore it into fragments, and threw them over the wall.

‘Bravo!’ cried the captain. ‘You remind me of your poor dear mother. The family spirit, Miss Vanstone. We all inherit our hot blood from my maternal grandfather.’

‘How did you come by it?’ she asked suddenly.

‘My dear creature, I have just told you,’ remonstrated the captain. ‘We all come by it from my maternal grandfather.’

‘How did you come by that handbill?’ she repeated passionately.

‘I beg ten thousand pardons! My head was running on the family spirit.—How did I come by it? Briefly thus.’ Here Captain Wragge entered on his personal statement; taking his customary vocal exercise through the longest words of the English language, with the highest elocutionary relish. Having on this rare occasion nothing to gain by concealment, he departed from his ordinary habits; and with the utmost amazement at the novelty of his own situation, permitted himself to tell the unmitigated truth.

The effect of the narrative on Magdalen by no means fulfilled Captain Wragge’s anticipations in relating it. She was not startled; she was not irritated; she showed no disposition to cast herself on his mercy, and to seek his advice. She looked him steadily in the face; and all she said when he had neatly rounded his last sentence, was —-‘Go on.’

‘Go on?’ repeated the captain. ‘Shocked to disappoint you, I am sure—but the fact is, I have done.’

‘No, you have not,’ she rejoined; ‘you have left out the end of your story. The end of it is:—You came here to look for me; and you mean to earn the fifty pounds reward.’

Those plain words so completely staggered Captain Wragge, that for the moment he stood speechless. But he had faced awkward truths of all sorts far too often to be permanently disconcerted by them. Before Magdalen could pursue her advantage, the vagabond had recovered his balance: Wragge was himself again.

‘Smart,’ said the captain, laughing indulgently, and drumming with his umbrella on the pavement. ‘Some men might take it seriously. I’m not easily offended. Try again.’

Magdalen looked at him through the gathering darkness, in mute perplexity. All her litde experience of society, had been experience among people who possessed a common sense of honour, and a common responsibility of

social position. She had hitherto seen nothing but the successful human product from the great manufactory of Civilization. Here was one of the failures—and, with all her quickness, she was puzzled how to deal with it.

'Pardon me for returning to the subject,' pursued the captain. 'It has just occurred to my mind that you might actually have spoken in earnest. My poor child! how can I earn the fifty pounds before the reward is offered to me? Those handbills may not be publicly posted for a week to come. Precious as you are to all your relatives (myself included), take my word for it, the lawyers who are managing this case will not pay fifty pounds for you if they can possibly help it. Are you still persuaded that my needy pockets are gaping for the money? Very good. Button them up in spite of me, with your own fair fingers. There is a train to London at nine-forty-five to-night. Submit yourself to your friend's wishes; and go back by it.'

'Never!' said Magdalen, firing at the bare suggestion, exactly as the captain had intended she should. 'If my mind had not been made up before, that vile handbill would have decided me. I forgive Norah,' she added, turning away, and speaking to herself, 'but not Mr. Pendril, and not Miss Garth.'

'Quite right!' observed Captain Wragge. 'The family spirit. I should have done the same myself at your age. It runs in the blood. Hark! there goes the clock again—half-past seven. Miss Vanstone, pardon this seasonable abruptness! If you are to carry out your resolution—if you are to be your own mistress much longer, you must take a course of some kind before eight o'clock. You are young, you are inexperienced, you are in imminent danger. Here is a position of emergency on one side—and here am I, on the other, with an uncle's interest in you, full of advice. Tap me.'

'Suppose I choose to depend on nobody, and to act for myself?' said Magdalen. 'What then?'

'Then,' replied the captain, 'you will walk straight into one of the four traps which are set to catch you in the ancient and interesting city of York. Trap the first, at Mr. Huxtable's house; trap the second, at all the hotels; trap the third, at the railway station; trap the fourth, at the theatre. That man with the handbills has had an hour at his disposal. If he has not set those four traps (with the assistance of the local solicitor) by this time, he is not the competent lawyer's clerk I take him for. Come, come, my dear girl! if there is somebody else in the background, whose advice you prefer to mine———'

'You see that I am alone,' she interposed proudly. 'If you knew me better, you would know that I depend on nobody but myself.'

Those words decided the only doubt which now remained in the captain's mind—the doubt whether the course was clear before him. The motive of her flight from home was evidently what the handbills assumed it to be—a reckless fancy for going on the stage. 'One of two things,' thought Wragge to himself in his logical way. 'She's worth more than fifty pounds to me in her present situation, or she isn't. If she is, her friends may whistle for her. If she isn't, I have only to keep her till the bills are posted.' Fortified by this simple plan of action, the captain returned to the charge; and politely placed Magdalen between the two inevitable alternatives of trusting herself to him, on the one hand, or of returning to her friends, on the other.

'I respect independence of character, wherever I find it,' he said, with an air of virtuous severity. 'In a young and lovely relative, I more than respect—I admire it. But (excuse the bold assertion), to walk on a way of your own, you must first have a way to walk on. Under existing circumstances, where is *your* way? Mr. Huxtable is out of the question, to begin with.'

'Out of the question for to-night,' said Magdalen; 'but what hinders me from writing to Mr. Huxtable, and making my own private arrangements with him for to-morrow?'

‘Granted with all my heart—a hit, a palpable hit.* Now, for my turn. To get to to-morrow (excuse the bold assertion, once more), you must first pass through to-night. Where are you to sleep?’

‘Are there no hotels in York?’

‘Excellent hotels, for large families; excellent hotels for single gentlemen. The very worst hotels in the world for handsome young ladies, who present themselves alone at the door, without male escort, without a maid in attendance, and without a single article of luggage. Dark as it is, I think I could see a lady’s box, if there was anything of the sort in our immediate neighbourhood.’

‘My box is at the cloak-room. What is to prevent my sending the ticket for it?’

‘Nothing—if you want to communicate your address by means of your box—nothing whatever. Think; pray think! Do you really suppose that the people who are looking for you, are such fools as not to have an eye on the cloakroom? Do you think they are such fools—when they find you don’t come to Mr. Huxtable’s at eight to-night—as not to inquire at all the hotels?’ Do you think a young lady of your striking appearance (even if they consented to receive you) could take up her abode at an inn, without becoming the subject of universal curiosity and remark? Here is night coming on as fast as it can. Don’t let me bore you; only let me ask once more—Where are you to sleep?’

There was no answer to that question: in Magdalen’s position, there was literally no answer to it on her side. She was silent.

‘Where are you to sleep?’ repeated the captain. ‘The reply is obvious—under my roof. Mrs. Wragge will be charmed to see you. Look upon her as your aunt; pray look upon her as your aunt. The landlady is a widow, the house is close by, there are no other lodgers, and there is a bedroom to let. Can anything be more satisfactory, under all the circumstances? Pray observe, I say nothing about to-morrow—I leave to-morrow to you, and confine myself exclusively to the night. I may, or may not, command theatrical facilities, which I am in a position to offer you. Sympathy and admiration may, or may not, be strong within me, when I contemplate the dash and independence of your character. Hosts of examples of bright stars of the British drama, who have begun their apprenticeship to the stage as you are beginning yours, may, or may not, crowd on my memory. These are topics for the future. For the present, I confine myself within my strict range of duty. We are within five minutes’ walk of my present address. Allow me to offer you my arm. No? You hesitate? You distrust me? Good Heavens! is it possible you can have heard anything to my disadvantage?’

‘Quite possible,’ said Magdalen, without a moment’s flinching from the answer.

‘May I inquire the particulars?’ asked the captain, with the politest composure. ‘Don’t spare my feelings; oblige me by speaking out. In the plainest terms, now, what have you heard?’

She answered him with a woman’s desperate disregard of consequences, when she is driven to bay—she answered him instantly:

‘I have heard you are a Rogue.’

‘Have you, indeed?’ said the impenetrable Wragge. ‘A Rogue? Well! I waive my privilege of setting you right on that point for a fitter time. For the sake of argument, let us say I am a Rogue. What is Mr. Huxtable?’

‘A respectable man, or I should not have seen him in the house where we first met.’

‘Very good. Now observe! You talked of writing to Mr. Huxtable, a minute ago. What do you think a

respectable man is likely to do with a young lady, who openly acknowledges that she has run away from her home and her friends to go on the stage? My dear girl, on your own showing, it's not a respectable man you want in your present predicament. It's a Rogue—like me.'

Magdalen laughed bitterly.

'There is some truth in that,' she said. 'Thank you for recalling me to myself and my circumstances. I have my end to gain—and who am I, to pick and choose the way of getting to it? It is my turn to beg pardon now. I have been talking as if I was a young lady of family and position. Absurd! We know better than that, don't we, Captain Wragge? You are quite right. Nobody's child must sleep under Somebody's roof—and why not yours?'

'This way,' said the captain, dexterously profiting by the sudden change in her humour, and cunningly refraining from exasperating it by saying more himself. 'This way.'

She followed him a few steps, and suddenly stopped.

'Suppose I *am* discovered?' she broke out abruptly. 'Who has any authority over me? Who can take me back, if I don't choose to go? If they all find me to-morrow, what then? Can't I say No, to Mr. Pendril? Can't I trust my own courage with Miss Garth?'

'Can you trust your courage with your sister?' whispered the captain, who had not forgotten the references to Norah which had twice escaped her already.

Her head drooped. She shivered, as if the cold night air had struck her, and leaned back wearily against the parapet of the wall.

'Not with Norah,' she said, sadly. 'I could trust myself with the others. Not with Norah.'

'This way,' repeated Captain Wragge. She roused herself; looked up at the darkening heaven, looked round at the darkening view. 'What must be, must,' she said—and followed him.

The Minster clock struck the quarter to eight as they left the Walk on the Wall, and descended the steps into Rosemary Lane. Almost at the same moment, the lawyer's clerk from London gave the last instructions to his subordinates, and took up his own position, on the opposite side of the river, within easy view of Mr. Huxtable's door.

Chapter II

Captain Wragge stopped nearly midway in the one little row of houses composing Rosemary Lane, and let himself and his guest in at the door of his lodgings, with his own key. As they entered the passage, a care-worn woman, in a widow's cap, made her appearance with a candle. 'My niece,' said the captain, presenting Magdalen; 'my niece on a visit to York. She has kindly consented to occupy your empty bedroom. Consider it let, if you please, to my niece—and be very particular in airing the sheets? Is Mrs. Wragge upstairs? Very good. You may lend me your candle. My dear girl, Mrs. Wragge's boudoir is on the first floor; Mrs. Wragge is visible. Allow me to show you the way up.'

As he ascended the stairs first, the care-worn widow whispered piteously to Magdalen: 'I hope you'll pay me, miss. Your uncle doesn't.'

The captain threw open the door of the front room on the first floor; and disclosed a female figure, arrayed in a gown of tarnished amber-coloured satin, seated solitary on a small chair, with dingy old gloves on its hands, with a tattered old book on its knees, and with one little bedroom candle by its side. The figure terminated at its upper extremity, in a large, smooth, white round face—like a moon—encircled by a cap and green ribbons; and dimly irradiated by eyes of mild and faded blue, which looked straightforward into vacancy, and took not the smallest notice of Magdalen's appearance, on the opening of the door.

'Mrs. Wragge!' cried the captain, shouting at her, as if she was fast asleep. 'Mrs. Wragge!'

The lady of the faded blue eyes slowly rose, to an apparently interminable height. When she had at last attained an upright position, she towered to a stature of two or three inches over six feet. Giants of both sexes are, by a wise dispensation of Providence, created for the most part gentle. If Mrs. Wragge and a lamb had been placed side by side—comparison, under those circumstances, would have exposed the lamb as a rank impostor.

'Tea, captain?' inquired Mrs. Wragge, looking submissively down at her husband, whose head when he stood on tiptoe barely reached her shoulder.

'Miss Vanstone, the younger,' said the captain, presenting Magdalen. 'Our fair relative, whom I have met by a fortunate accident. Our guest for the night. Our guest!' reiterated the captain, shouting once more, as if the tall lady was still fast asleep, in spite of the plain testimony of her own eyes to the contrary.

A smile expressed itself (in faint outline) on the large vacant space of Mrs. Wragge's countenance. 'Oh?' she said, interrogatively. 'Oh, indeed? Please, miss, will you sit down? I'm sorry—no, I don't mean I'm sorry; I mean I'm glad———' She stopped, and consulted her husband by a helpless look.

'Glad, of course!' shouted the captain.

'Glad, of course,' echoed the giantess of the amber satin, more meekly than ever.

'Mrs. Wragge is not deaf,' explained the captain. 'She's only a little slow. Constitutionally torpid—if I may use the expression. I am merely loud with her (and I beg you will honour me by being loud, too) as a necessary stimulant to her ideas. Shout at her—and her mind comes up to time. Speak to her—and she drifts miles away from you directly. Mrs. Wragge!'

Mrs. Wragge instantly acknowledged the stimulant. 'Tea, captain?' she inquired, for the second time.

'Put your cap straight!' shouted her husband. 'I beg ten thousand pardons,' he resumed, again addressing himself to Magdalen. 'The sad truth is, I am a martyr to my own sense of order. All untidiness, all want of system and regularity, causes me the acutest irritation. My attention is distracted, my composure is upset; I can't rest till things are set straight again. Externally speaking, Mrs. Wragge is, to my infinite regret, the crookedest woman I ever met with. More to the right!' shouted the captain, as Mrs. Wragge, like a well-trained child, presented herself with her revised head-dress for her husband's inspection.

Mrs. Wragge immediately pulled the cap to the left. Magdalen rose, and set it right for her. The moon-face of the giantess brightened for the first time. She looked admiringly at Magdalen's cloak and bonnet. 'Do you like dress, miss?' she asked suddenly, in a confidential whisper. 'I do.'

'Show Miss Vanstone her room,' said the captain, looking as if the whole house belonged to him. 'The spare-room, the landlady's spare-room, on the third floor front. Offer Miss Vanstone all articles connected with the toilet of which she may stand in need. She has no luggage with her. Supply the deficiency; and then come back and make tea.'

Mrs. Wragge acknowledged the receipt of these lofiy directions by a look of placid bewilderment, and led the way out of the room; Magdalen following her, with a candle presented by the attentive captain. As soon as they were alone on the landing outside, Mrs. Wragge raised the tattered old book which she had been reading when Magdalen was first presented to her, and which she had never let out of her hand since; and slowly tapped herself on the forehead with it. 'Oh, my poor head,' said the tall lady, in meek soliloquy; 'it's Buzzing again worse than ever!'

'Buzzing?' repeated Magdalen, in the utmost astonishment.

Mrs. Wragge ascended the stairs, without offering any explanation; stopped at one of the rooms on the second floor and led the way in.

'This is not the third floor,' said Magdalen. 'This is not my room, surely?'

'Wait a bit,' pleaded Mrs. Wragge. 'Wait a bit, miss, before we go up any higher. I've got the Buzzing in my head worse than ever. Please wait for me till I'm a little better again.'

'Shall I ask for help?' inquired Magdalen. 'Shall I call the landlady?'

'Help?' echoed Mrs. Wragge. 'Bless you, I don't want help! I'm used to it. I've had the Buzzing in my head, off and on—how many years?' She stopped, reflected, lost herself, and suddenly tried a question in despair. 'Have you ever been at Darch's Dining-Rooms in London?' she asked, with an appearance of the deepest interest.

'No,' replied Magdalen, wondering at the strange inquiry.

'That's where the Buzzing in my head first began,' said Mrs. Wragge, following the new clue, with the deepest attention and anxiety. 'I was employed to wait on the gendemen at Darch's Dining-Rooms—I was. The gentlemen all came together; the gendemen were all hungry together; the gendemen all gave their orders together———' She stopped, and tapped her head again despondendy, with the tattered old book.

'And you had to keep all their orders in your memory, separate one from the other?' suggested Magdalen, helping her out. 'And the trying to do that, confused you?'

'That's it!' said Mrs. Wragge, becoming violently excited in a moment. 'Boiled pork and greens and peas-pudding, for Number One. Stewed beef and carrots and gooseberry tart, for Number Two. Cut of mutton, and quick about it, well done, and plenty of fat, for Number Three. Codfish and parsnips, two chops to follow, hot-and-hot, or I'll be the death of you, for Number Four. Five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Carrots and gooseberry tart—peas-pudding and plenty of fat—pork and beef and mutton, and cut 'em all, and quick about it—stout for one, and ale for t'other—and stale bread here, and new bread there—and this gendeman likes cheese, and that gendeman doesn't—Matilda, Tilda, Tilda, Tilda, fifty times over, till I didn't know my own name again—oh lord! oh lord!! oh lord!!! all together, all at the same time, all out of temper, all buzzing in my poor head like forty thousand million bees—don't tell the captain! don't tell the captain!' The unfortunate creature dropped the tattered old book, and beat both her hands on her head, with a look of blank terror fixed on the door.

'Hush! hush!' said Magdalen. 'The captain hasn't heard you. I know what is the matter with your head now. Let me cool it.'

She dipped a towel in water, and pressed it on the hot and helpless head which Mrs. Wragge submitted to her with the docility of a sick child.

'What a pretty hand you've got,' said the poor creature, feeling the relief of the coolness, and taking Magdalen's

hand admiringly in her own. ‘How soft and white it is! I try to be a lady; I always keep my gloves on—but I can’t get my hands like yours. I’m nicely dressed, though, aint I? I like dress; it’s a comfort to me. I’m always happy when I’m looking at my things. I say—you won’t be angry with me?—I should so like to try your bonnet on.’

Magdalen humoured her, with the ready compassion of the young. She stood smiling and nodding at herself in the glass, with the bonnet perched on the top of her head. ‘I had one, as pretty as this, once,’ she said—‘only it was white, not black. I wore it when the captain married me.’

‘Where did you meet with him?’ asked Magdalen, putting the question as a chance means of increasing her scanty stock of information on the subject of Captain Wragge.

‘At the Dining-Rooms,’ said Mrs. Wragge. ‘He was the hungriest and the loudest to wait upon of the lot of ’em. I made more mistakes with him, than I did with all the rest of them put together. He used to swear—oh, didn’t he use to swear! When he left off swearing at me, he married me. There was others wanted me besides him. Bless you, I had my pick. Why not? When you have a trifle of money left you that you didn’t expect, if that don’t make a lady of you, what does? Isn’t a lady to have her pick? I had my trifle of money, and I had my pick, and I picked the captain—I did. He was the smartest and the shortest of them all. He took care of me and my money. I’m here, the money’s gone. Don’t you put that towel down on the table—he won’t have that! Don’t move his razors—don’t please, or I shall forget which is which. I’ve got to remember which is which to-morrow morning. Bless you, the captain don’t shave himself. He had me taught. I shave him. I do his hair, and cut his nails—he’s awfully particular about his nails. So he is about his trousers. And his shoes. And his newspaper in the morning. And his breakfasts, and lunches, and dinners, and teas———’ She stopped, struck by a sudden recollection, looked about her, observed the tattered old book on the floor, and clasped her hands in despair. ‘I’ve lost the place!’ she exclaimed, helplessly. ‘Oh, mercy, what will become of me! I’ve lost the place.’

‘Never mind,’ said Magdalen; ‘I’ll soon find the place for you again.’

She picked up the book, looked into the pages, and found that the object of Mrs. Wragge’s anxiety was nothing more important than an old-fashioned Treatise on the Art of Cookery, reduced under the usual heads of Fish, Flesh, and Fowl, and containing the customary series of receipts. Turning over the leaves, Magdalen came to one particular page, thickly studded with litde drops of moisture, half dry. ‘Curious!’ she said. ‘If this was anything but a cookery-book, I should say somebody had been crying over it.’

‘Somebody?’ echoed Mrs. Wragge, with a stare of amazement. ‘It isn’t somebody—it’s Me. Thank you kindly, that’s the place sure enough. Bless you, I’m used to crying over it. You’d cry too, if you had to get the captain’s dinners out of it. As sure as ever I sit down to this book, the Buzzing in my head begins again. Who’s to make it out? Sometimes, I think I’ve got it, and it all goes away from me. Sometimes, I think I haven’t got it, and it all comes back in a heap. Look here! Here’s what he’s ordered for his breakfast tomorrow:—“Omelette with Herbs. Beat up two eggs with a litde water or milk, salt, pepper, chives, and parsley. Mince small.”—There! mince small! How am I to mince small, when it’s all mixed up and running? “Put a piece of butter the size of your thumb into the frying-pan.”—Look at my thumb, and look at yours! whose size does she mean? “Boil, but not brown.”—If it mustn’t be brown, what colour must it be? She won’t tell me; she expects me to know, and I don’t. “Pour in the omelette.”—There! I can do that. “Allow it to set, raise it round the edge; when done, turn it over to double it.”—Oh, the numbers of times I turned it over and doubled it in my head, before you came in to-night! “Keep it soft; put the dish on the frying-pan, and turn it over.” Which am I to turn over—oh mercy, try the cold towel again, and tell me which—the dish or the frying-pan?’

‘Put the dish on the frying-pan,’ said Magdalen; ‘and then turn the frying-pan over. That is what it means, I

think.'

'Thank you kindly,' said Mrs. Wragge, 'I want to get it into my head; please say it again.'

Magdalen said it again.

'And then turn the frying-pan over,' repeated Mrs. Wragge, with a sudden burst of energy. 'I've got it now! Oh, the lots of omelettes all frying together in my head; and all frying wrong. Much obliged, I'm sure. You've put me all right again: I'm only a little tired with talking. And then turn the frying-pan, then turn the frying-pan, then turn the frying-pan over. It sounds like poetry, don't it?'

Her voice sank, and she drowsily closed her eyes. At the same moment, the door of the room below opened, and the captain's mellifluous bass notes floated up stairs, charged with the customary stimulant to his wife's faculties.

'Mrs. Wragge!' cried the captain. 'Mrs. Wragge!'

She started to her feet at that terrible summons. 'Oh, what did he tell me to do?' she asked distractedly. 'Lots of things, and I've forgotten them all!'

'Say you have done them, when he asks you,' suggested Magdalen. 'They were things for me—things I don't want. I remember all that is necessary. My room is the front room, on the third floor. Go down stairs, and say I am coming directiy.'

She took up the candle, and pushed Mrs. Wragge out on the landing. 'Say I am coming directly,' she whispered again—and went upstairs by herself to the third story.

The room was small, close, and very poorly furnished. In former days, Miss Garth would have hesitated to offer such a room to one of the servants, at Combe-Raven. But it was quiet; it gave her a few minutes alone; and it was endurable, even welcome, on that account. She locked herself in; and walked mechanically, with a woman's first impulse in a strange bedroom, to the rickety little table, and the dingy little looking-glass. She waited there for a moment, and then turned away with weary contempt. 'What does it matter how pale I am?' she thought to herself. 'Frank can't see me—what does it matter now!'

She laid aside her cloak and bonnet, and sat down to collect herself. But the events of the day had worn her out. The past, when she tried to remember it, only made her heart ache. The future, when she tried to penetrate it, was a black void. She rose again, and stood by the uncurtained window—stood looking out, as if there was some hidden sympathy for her own desolation in the desolate night.

'Norah!' she said to herself, tenderly; 'I wonder if Norah is thinking of me? Oh, if I could be as patient as she is! If I could only forget the debt we owe to Michael Vanstone!'

Her face darkened with a vindictive despair, and she paced the little cage of a room backwards and forwards, softly. 'No: never till the debt is paid!' Her thoughts veered back again to Frank. 'Still at sea, poor fellow; farther and farther away from me; sailing through the day, sailing through the night. Oh, Frank, love me!'

Her eyes filled with tears. She dashed them away, made for the door, and laughed with a desperate levity, as she unlocked it again.

'Any company is better than my own thoughts,' she burst out recklessly, as she left the room. 'I'm forgetting my ready-made relations—my half-witted aunt, and my uncle the rogue.' She descended the stairs to the landing

on the first floor, and paused there in momentary hesitation. ‘How will it end?’ she asked herself. ‘Where is my blindfolded journey taking me to now? Who knows, and who cares?’

She entered the room.

Captain Wragge was presiding at the tea-tray, with the air of a prince in his own banqueting-hall. At one side of the table sat Mrs. Wragge, watching her husband’s eye, like an animal waiting to be fed. At the other side, was an empty chair, towards which the captain waved his persuasive hand, when Magdalen came in. ‘How do you like your room?’ he inquired; ‘I trust Mrs. Wragge has made herself useful? You take milk and sugar? Try the local bread, honour the York butter, test the freshness of a new and neighbouring egg. I offer my little all. A pauper’s meal, my dear girl—seasoned with a gentleman’s welcome.’

‘Seasoned with salt, pepper, chives, and parsley,’ murmured Mrs. Wragge, catching instantly at a word in connection with cookery, and harnessing her head to the omelette for the rest of the evening.

‘Sit straight at the table!’ shouted the captain. ‘More to the left, more still—that will do. During your absence upstairs,’ he continued, addressing himself to Magdalen, ‘my mind has not been unemployed. I have been considering your position, with a view exclusively to your own benefit. If you decide on being guided to-morrow by the light of my experience, that light is unreservedly at your service. You may naturally say, ‘I know but little of you, captain, and that little is unfavourable.’ Granted, on one condition—that you permit me to make myself and my character quite familiar to you, when tea is over. False shame is foreign to my nature. You see my wife, my house, my bread, my butter, and my eggs, all exactly as they are. See me, too, my dear girl, while you are about it.’

When tea was over, Mrs. Wragge, at a signal from her husband, retired to a corner of the room, with the eternal cookery-book still in her hand. ‘Mince small,’ she whispered confidentially, as she passed Magdalen. ‘That’s a teaser, isn’t it?’

‘Down at heel again!’ shouted the captain, pointing to his wife’s heavy flat feet as they shuffled across the room. ‘The right shoe. Pull it up at heel, Mrs. Wragge—pull it up at heel! Pray allow me,’ he continued, offering his arm to Magdalen, and escorting her to a dirty little horsehair sofa. ‘You want repose—after your long journey, you really want repose.’ He drew his chair to the sofa, and surveyed her with a bland look of investigation—as if he had been her medical attendant, with a diagnosis on his mind.

‘Very pleasant! very pleasant!’ said the captain, when he had seen his guest comfortable on the sofa. ‘I feel quite in the bosom of my family. Shall we return to our subject—the subject of my rascally self? No! no! No apologies, no protestations, pray. Don’t mince the matter on your side—and depend on me not to mince it on mine. Now come to facts; pray come to facts. Who, and what, am I? Carry your mind back to our conversation on the Walls of this interesting city, and let us start once more from your point of view. I am a Rogue; and, in that capacity (as I have already pointed out), the most useful man you could possibly have met with. Now observe! There are many varieties of Rogue; let me tell you my variety to begin with. I am a Swindler.’

His entire shamelessness was really superhuman. Not the vestige of a blush varied the sallow monotony of his complexion; the smile wreathed his curly lips, as pleasantly as ever; his parti-coloured eyes twinkled at Magdalen, with the self-enjoying frankness of a naturally harmless man. Had his wife heard him? Magdalen looked over his shoulder to the comer of the room in which she was sitting behind him. No: the self-taught student of cookery was absorbed in her subject. She had advanced her imaginary omelette to the critical stage at which the butter was to be thrown in—that vaguely measured morsel of butter, the size of your thumb. Mrs. Wragge sat lost in contemplation of one of her own thumbs, and shook her head over it, as if it failed to satisfy

her.

‘Don’t be shocked,’ proceeded the captain; ‘don’t be astonished. Swindler is nothing but a word of two syllables. S, W, I, N, D—swind; L, E, R—ler; Swindler. Definition: A moral agriculturist; a man who cultivates the field of human sympathy. I am that moral agriculturist, that cultivating man. Narrow-minded mediocrity, envious of my success in my profession, calls me a Swindler. What of that? The same low tone of mind assails men in other professions in a similar manner—calls great writers, scribblers—great generals, butchers—and so on. It entirely depends on the point of view. Adopting your point, I announce myself intelligibly as a Swindler. Now return the obligation, and adopt mine. Hear what I have to say for myself, in the exercise of my profession. —Shall I continue to put it frankly?’

‘Yes,’ said Magdalen; ‘and I’ll tell you frankly afterwards what I think of it.’

The captain cleared his throat; mentally assembled his entire army of words—horse, foot, artillery, and reserves; put himself at the head; and dashed into action, to carry the moral entrenchments of Society by a general charge.

‘Now, observe,’ he began. ‘Here am I, a needy object. Very good. Without complicating the question by asking how I come to be in that condition, I will merely inquire whether it is, or is not, the duty of a Christian community to help the needy. If you say, No, you simply shock me; and there is an end of it. If you say, Yes—then I beg to ask, Why am I to blame for milking a Christian community do its duty? You may say, Is a careful man who has saved money, bound to spend it again on a careless stranger who has saved none? Why of course he is! And on what ground, pray? Good Heavens! on the ground that he has *got* the money, to be sure. All the world over, the man who has not got the thing, obtains it, on one pretence or another, of the man who has—and in nine cases out of ten, the pretence is a false one. What! your pockets are full, and my pockets are empty; and you refuse to help me? Sordid wretch! do you think I will allow you to violate the sacred obligations of charity in my person? I won’t allow you—I say distinctly, I won’t allow you. Those are my principles as a moral agriculturist. Principles which admit of trickery? Certainly. Am I to blame if the field of human sympathy can’t be cultivated in any other way? Consult my brother agriculturists in the mere farming line—do they get their crops for the asking? No! they must circumvent arid Nature, exactly as I circumvent sordid man. They must plough, and sow, and top-dress, and bottom-dress, and deep-drain, and surface-drain, and all the rest of it. Why am I to be checked in the vast occupation of deep-draining mankind? Why am I to be persecuted for habitually exciting the noblest feelings of our common nature? Infamous!—I can characterize it by no other word—infamous! If I hadn’t confidence in the future, I should despair of humanity—but I have confidence in the future. Yes! one of these days (when I am dead and gone), as ideas enlarge and enlightenment progresses, the abstract merits of the profession now called swindling, will be recognized. When that day comes, don’t drag me out of my grave and give me a public funeral; don’t take advantage of my having no voice to raise in my own defence, and insult me by a national statue. No! do me justice on my tombstone; dash me off, in one masterly sentence, on my epitaph. Here lies Wragge, Embalmed in the tardy recognition of his species: he ploughed, sowed, and reaped his fellow-creatures; and enlightened posterity congratulates him on the uniform excellence of his crops.’

He stopped; not from want of confidence, not from want of words—purely from want of breath. ‘I put it frankly, with a dash of humour,’ he said, pleasandy. ‘I don’t shock you—do I?’ Weary and heartsick as she was—suspicious of others, doubtful of herself—the extravagant impudence of Captain Wragge’s defence of swindling, touched Magdalen’s natural sense of humour, and forced a smile to her lips. ‘Is the Yorkshire crop a particularly rich one, just at present?’ she inquired, meeting him, in her neady feminine way, with his own weapons.

‘A hit—a palpable hit,’ said the captain, jocosely exhibiting the tails of his threadbare shooting-jacket, as a practical commentary on Magdalen’s remark. ‘My dear girl, here or elsewhere, the crop never fails—but one

man can't always gather it in. The assistance of intelligent co-operation is, I regret to say, denied me. I have nothing in common with the clumsy rank and file of my profession, who convict themselves before recorders and magistrates, of the worst of all offences—incurable stupidity in the exercise of their own vocation. Such as you see me, I stand entirely alone. After years of successful self-dependence, the penalties of celebrity are beginning to attach to me. On my way from the North, I pause at this interesting city for the third time; I consult my Books for the customary references to past local experience; I find under the heading, "Personal position in York," the initials, T. W. K. signifying Too Well Known. I refer to my Index, and turn to the surrounding neighbourhood. The same brief remarks meet my eye. "Leeds. T. W. K.—Scarborough. T. W. K.—Harrowgate. T. W. K."—and so on. What is the inevitable consequence? I suspend my proceedings; my resources evaporate; and my fair relative finds me the pauper gendeman whom she now sees before her.'

'Your books?' said Magdalen. 'What books do you mean?'

'You shall see,' replied the captain. 'Trust me, or not, as you like—I trust *you* implicitly. You shall see.'

With those words he retired into the back room. While he was gone, Magdalen stole another look at Mrs. Wragge. Was she still self-isolated from her husband's deluge of words? Perfectly self-isolated. She had advanced the imaginary omelette to the last stage of culinary progress; and she was now rehearsing the final operation of turning it over—with the palm of her hand to represent the dish, and the cookery-book to impersonate the frying-pan. 'I've got it,' said Mrs. Wragge, nodding across the room at Magdalen. 'First put the frying-pan on the dish, and then tumble both of them over.'

Captain Wragge returned, carrying a neat black despatch-box, adorned with a bright brass lock. He produced from the box five or six plump little books, bound in commercial calf and vellum, and each fitted comfortably with its own little lock.

'Mind!' said the moral agriculturist: 'I take no credit to myself for this: it is my nature to be orderly, and orderly I am. I must have everything down in black and white, or I should go mad! Here is my commercial library:—Day Book, Ledger, Book of Districts, Book of Letters, Book of Remarks, and so on. Kindly throw your eye over any one of them. I flatter myself there is no such thing as a blot or a careless entry in it from the first page to the last. Look at this room—is there a chair out of place? Not if I know it! Look at *me*. Am I dusty? am I dirty? am I half shaved? Am I, in brief, a speckless pauper, or am I not? Mind! I take no credit to myself; the nature of the man, my dear girl—the nature of the man!'

He opened one of the books. Magdalen was no judge of the admirable correctness with which the accounts inside were all kept; but she could estimate the neatness of the handwriting, the regularity in the rows of figures, the mathematical exactness of the ruled lines in red and black ink, the cleanly absence of blots, stains, or erasures. Although Captain Wragge's inborn sense of order was, in him—as it is in others—a sense too inveterately mechanical to exercise any elevating moral influence over his actions, it had produced its legitimate effect on his habits, and had reduced his rogueries as strictly to method and system as if they had been the commercial transactions of an honest man.

'In appearance, my system looks complicated?' pursued the captain. 'In reality, it is simplicity itself. I merely avoid the errors of inferior practitioners. That is to say, I never plead for myself; and I never apply to rich people—both fatal mistakes which the inferior practitioner perpetually commits. People with small means sometimes have generous impulses in connection with money—rich people, *never*. My lord, with forty thousand a year; Sir John, with property in half a dozen counties—those are the men who never forgive the genteel beggar for swindling them out of a sovereign; those are the men who send for the mendicity officers;* those are the men who take care of their money. Who are the people who lose shillings and sixpences, by sheer thoughtlessness?

Servants and small clerks, to whom shillings and sixpences are of consequence. Did you ever hear of Rothschild or Baring* dropping a fourpenny-piece down a gutter-hole? Fourpence in Rothschild's pocket is safer than fourpence in the pocket of that woman who is crying stale shrimps in Skeldergate at this moment. Fortified by these sound principles, enlightened by the stores of written information in my commercial library, I have ranged through the population for years past, and have raised my charitable crops with the most cheering success. Here, in book Number One, are all my Districts mapped out, with the prevalent public feeling to appeal to in each:—Military District, Clerical District, Agricultural District; Etcetera, Etcetera. Here, in Number Two, are my cases that I plead:—Family of an officer who fell at Waterloo; Wife of a poor curate stricken down by nervous debility; Widow of a grazier in difficulties gored to death by a mad bull; Etcetera, Etcetera. Here, in Number Three, are the people who have heard of the officer's family, the curate's wife, the grazier's widow, and the people who haven't; the people who have said Yes, and the people who have said No; the people to try again, the people who want a fresh case to stir them up, the people who are doubtful, the people to beware of; Etcetera, Etcetera. Here, in Number Four, are my Adopted Handwritings of public characters; my testimonials to my own worth and integrity; my Heartrending Statements of the officer's family, the curate's wife, and the grazier's widow, stained with tears, blotted with emotion; Etcetera, Etcetera. Here, in Numbers Five and Six, are my own personal subscriptions to local charities, actually paid in remunerative neighbourhoods, on the principle of throwing a sprat to catch a herring; also, my diary of each day's proceedings, my personal reflections and remarks, my statement of existing difficulties (such as the difficulty of finding myself T. W. K., in this interesting city);. my out-goings and in-comings; wind and weather; politics and public events; fluctuations in my own health; fluctuations in Mrs. Wragge's head; fluctuations in our means and meals, our payments, prospects, and principles; Etcetera, Etcetera. So, my dear girl, the Swindler's Mill goes. So you see me, exactiy as I am. You knew, before I met you, that I lived on my wits. Well! have I, or have I not, shown you that I have wits to live on?'

'I have no doubt you have done yourself full justice,' said Magdalen, quietly.

'I am not at all exhausted,' continued the captain. 'I can go on, if necessary, for the rest of the evening.—However, if I have done myself full justice, perhaps I may leave the remaining points in my character to develop themselves at future opportunities. For the present, I withdraw myself from notice. Exit Wragge. And now to business! Permit me to inquire what effect I have produced on your own mind? Do you still believe that the Rogue who has trusted you with all his secrets, is a Rogue who is bent on taking a mean advantage of a fair relative?'

'I will wait a little,' Magdalen rejoined, 'before I answer that question. When I came down to tea, you told me you had been employing your mind for my benefit. May I ask how?'

'By all means,' said Captain Wragge. 'You shall have the net result of the whole mental process. Said process ranges over the present and future proceedings of your disconsolate friends, and of the lawyers who are helping them to find you. Their present proceedings are, in all probability, assuming the following form:—The lawyer's clerk has given you up at Mr. Huxtable's, and has also, by this time, given you up after careful inquiry at all the hotels. His last chance is, that you may send for your box to the cloak-room—you don't send for it—and there the clerk is to-night (thanks to Captain Wragge and Rosemary Lane) at the end of his resources. He will forthwith communicate that fact to his employers in London; and those employers (don't be alarmed!) will apply for help to the detective police. Allowing for inevitable delays, a professional spy, with all his wits about him, and with those handbills to help him privately in identifying you, will be here, certainly not later than the day after to-morrow—possibly earlier. If you remain in York, if you attempt to communicate with Mr. Huxtable, that spy will find you out. If, on the other hand, you leave the city before he comes (taking your departure by other means than the railway, of course), you put him in the same predicament as the clerk—you

defy him to find a fresh trace of you. There is my brief abstract of your present position. What do you think of it?'

'I think it has one defect,' said Magdalen. 'It ends in nothing.'

'Pardon me,' retorted the captain. 'It ends in an arrangement for your safe departure, and in a plan for the entire gratification of your wishes in the direction of the stage. Both drawn from the resources of my own experience; and both waiting a word from you, to be poured forth immediately, in the fullest detail.'

'I think I know what that word is,' replied Magdalen, looking at him attentively.

'Charmed to hear it, I am sure. You have only to say, "Captain Wragge, take charge of me"—and my plans are yours from that moment.'

'I will take to-night to consider your proposal,' she said, after an instant's reflection. 'You shall have my answer to-morrow morning.'

Captain Wragge looked a little disappointed. He had not expected the reservation on his side to be met so composedly by a reservation on hers.

'Why not decide at once?' he remonstrated, in his most persuasive tones. 'You have only to consider———'

'I have more to consider than you think for,' she answered. 'I have another object in view, besides the object you know of.'

'May I ask———?'

'Excuse me, Captain Wragge—you may *not* ask. Allow me to thank you for your hospitality, and to wish you good night. I am worn out. I want rest.'

Once more, the captain wisely adapted himself to her humour, with the ready self-control of an experienced man.

'Worn-out, of course!' he said, sympathetically. 'Unpardonable on my part not to have thought of it before. We will resume our conversation to-morrow. Permit me to give you a candle. Mrs. Wragge!'

Prostrated by mental exertion, Mrs. Wragge was pursuing the course of the omelette in dreams. Her head was twisted one way, and her body the other. She snored meekly. At intervals, one of her hands raised itself in the air, shook an imaginary frying-pan, and dropped again with a faint thump on the cookery-book in her lap. At the sound of her husband's voice, she started to her feet; and confronted him with her mind fast asleep, and her eyes wide open.

'Assist Miss Vanstone,' said the captain. 'And the next time you forget yourself in your chair, fall asleep straight—don't annoy me by falling asleep crooked.'

Mrs. Wragge opened her eyes a little wider, and looked at Magdalen in helpless amazement.

'Is the captain breakfasting by candlelight?' she inquired, meekly. 'And haven't I done the omelette?'

Before her husband's corrective voice could apply a fresh stimulant, Magdalen took her compassionately by the arm, and led her out of the room.

'Another object besides the object I know of?' repeated Captain Wragge, when he was left by himself. *'Is* there

a gentleman in the background, after all? Is there mischief brewing in the dark, that I don't bargain for?'

Chapter III

Towards six o'clock the next morning, the light pouring in on her face awoke Magdalen in the bedroom in Rosemary Lane.

She started from her deep dreamless repose of the past night, with that painful sense of bewilderment on first waking which is familiar to all sleepers in strange beds. 'Norah!' she called out mechanically, when she opened her eyes. The next instant, her mind roused itself, and her senses told her the truth. She looked round the miserable room with a loathing recognition of it. The sordid contrast which the place presented to all that she had been accustomed to see in her own bedchamber—the practical abandonment implied in its scanty furniture, of those elegant purities of personal habit to which she had been accustomed from her childhood—shocked that sense of bodily self-respect in Magdalen, which is a refined woman's second nature. Contemptible as the influence seemed when compared with her situation at that moment, the bare sight of the jug and basin in a corner of the room, decided her first resolution when she woke. She determined, then and there, to leave Rosemary Lane.

How was she to leave it? With Captain Wragge, or without him?

She dressed herself, with a dainty shrinking from everything in the room which her hands or her clothes touched in the process; and then opened the window. The autumn air felt keen and sweet; and the little patch of sky that she could see, was warmly bright already with the new sunlight. Distant voices of bargemen on the river, and the chirping of birds among the weeds which topped the old city wall, were the only sounds that broke the morning silence. She sat down by the window; and searched her mind for the thoughts which she had lost, when weariness overcame her on the night before.

The first subject to which she returned, was the vagabond subject of Captain Wragge.

The 'moral agriculturist' had failed to remove her personal distrust of him, cunningly as he had tried to plead against it by openly confessing the impostures that he had practised on others. He had raised her opinion of his abilities; he had amused her by his humour; he had astonished her by his assurance—but he had left her original conviction that he was a Rogue, exactly where it was when he first met with her. If the one design then in her mind had been the design of going on the stage, she would, at all hazards, have rejected the more than doubtful assistance of Captain Wragge, on the spot.

But the perilous journey on which she had now adventured herself, had another end in view—an end, dark and distant—an end, with pitfalls hidden on the way to it, far other than the shallow pitfalls on the way to the stage. In the mysterious stillness of the morning, her mind looked on to its second and its deeper design; and the despicable figure of the swindler rose before her in a new view.

She tried to shut him out—to feel above him and beyond him again, as she had felt up to this time.

After a little trifling with her dress, she took from her bosom the white silk bag which her own hands had made on the farewell night at Combe-Raven. It drew together at the mouth with delicate silken strings. The first thing she took out, on opening it, was a lock of Frank's hair, tied with a morsel of silver thread; the next was a sheet of paper containing the extracts which she had copied from her father's will and her father's letter; the last was a

closely folded packet of bank-notes, to the value of nearly two hundred pounds—the produce (as Miss Garth had rightly conjectured) of the sale of her jewelry and her dresses, in which the servant at the boarding school had privately assisted her. She put back the notes at once, without a second glance at them; and then sat looking thoughtfully at the lock of hair, as it lay on her lap. 'You are better than nothing,' she said, speaking to it with a girl's fanciful tenderness. 'I can sit and look at you sometimes, till I almost think I am looking at Frank. Oh, my darling! my darling!' Her voice faltered softly, and she put the lock of hair, with a languid gentleness, to her lips. It fell from her fingers into her bosom. A lovely tinge of colour rose on her cheeks, and spread downward to her neck, as if it followed the falling hair. She closed her eyes, and let her fair head droop softly. The world passed from her; and, for one enchanted moment, Love opened the gates of Paradise to the daughter of Eve.

The trivial noises in the neighbouring street, gathering in number as the morning advanced, forced her back to the hard realities of the passing time. She raised her head, with a heavy sigh, and opened her eyes once more on the mean and miserable little room.

The extracts from the will and the letter—those last memorials of her father, now so closely associated with the purpose which had possession of her mind—still lay before her. The transient colour faded from her face, as she spread the litde manuscript open on her lap. The extracts from the will stood highest on the page; they were limited to those few touching words, in which the dead father begged his children's forgiveness for the stain on their birth, and implored them to remember the untiring love and care by which he had striven to atone for it. The extract from the letter to Mr. Pendril came next. She read the last melancholy sentences aloud to herself: —'For God's sake come on the day when you receive this—come and relieve me from the dreadful thought that my two darling girls are at this moment unprovided for. If anything happened to me, and if my desire to do their mother justice, ended (through my miserable ignorance of the law) in leaving Norah and Magdalen disinherited, I should not rest in my grave!' Under these fines again, and close at the bottom of the page, was written the terrible commentary on that letter which had fallen from Mr. Pendril's lips:—'Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children, and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle's mercy.'

Helpless when those words were spoken—helpless still, after all that she had resolved, after all that she had sacrificed. The assertion of her natural rights, and her sister's, sanctioned by the direct expression of her father's last wishes; the recall of Frank from China; the justification of her desertion of Norah—all hung on her desperate purpose of recovering the lost inheritance, at any risk, from the man who had beggared and insulted his brother's children. And that man was still a shadow to her! So litde did she know of him that she was even ignorant, at that moment, of his place of abode.

She rose and paced the room, with the noiseless, negligent grace of a wild creature of the forest in its cage. 'How can I reach him, in the dark?' she said to herself. 'How can I find out———?' She stopped suddenly. Before the question had shaped itself to an end in her thoughts, Captain Wragge was back in her mind again.

A man well used to working in the dark; a man with endless resources of audacity and cunning; a man who would hesitate at no mean employment that could be offered to him, if it was employment that filled his pockets —was this the instrument for which, in its present need, her hand was waiting? Two of the necessities to be met, before she could take a single step in advance, were plainly present to her—the necessity of knowing more of her father's brother than she knew now; and the necessity of throwing him off his guard by concealing herself personally, during the process of inquiry. Resolutely self-dependent as she was, the inevitable spy's work at the outset must be work delegated to another. In her position, was there any ready human creature within reach, but the vagabond downstairs? Not one. She thought of it anxiously, she thought of it long. Not one! There the choice was, steadily confronting her: the choice of taking the Rogue, or of turning her back on the Purpose.

She paused in the middle of the room. 'What can he do at his worst?' she said to herself. 'Cheat me. Well! if my

money governs him for me, what then? Let him have my money! She returned mechanically to her place by the window. A moment more decided her. A moment more, and she took the first fatal step downwards—she determined to face the risk, and try Captain Wragge.

At nine o'clock the landlady knocked at Magdalen's door, and informed her (with the captain's kind compliments), that breakfast was ready.

She found Mrs. Wragge alone; attired in a voluminous brown holland wrapper, with a limp cape, and a trimming of dingy pink ribbon. The ex-waitress at Darch's Dining Rooms was absorbed in the contemplation of a large dish, containing a leathery-looking substance of a motded yellow colour, profusely sprinkled with little black spots.

'There it is!' said Mrs. Wragge. 'Omelette with herbs. The landlady helped me. And that's what we've made of it. Don't you ask the captain for any when he comes in—don't, there's a good soul. It isn't nice. We had some accidents with it. It's been under the grate. It's been spilt on the stairs. It's scalded the landlady's youngest boy —he went and sat on it. Bless you, it isn't half as nice as it looks! Don't you ask for any. Perhaps he won't notice if you say nothing about it. What do you think of my wrapper? I should so like to have a white one. Have you got a white one? How is it trimmed? Do tell me!'

The formidable entrance of the captain suspended the next question on her lips. Fortunately for Mrs. Wragge, her husband was far too anxious for the promised expression of Magdalen's decision, to pay his customary attention to questions of cookery. When breakfast was over, he dismissed Mrs. Wragge, and merely referred to the omelette by telling her that she had his full permission to 'give it to the dog.'

'How does my little proposal look by daylight?' he asked, placing chairs for Magdalen and himself. 'Which is it to be: "Captain Wragge, take charge of me?" or, "Captain Wragge, good morning?" '

'You shall hear directly,' replied Magdalen. 'I have something to say first. I told you, last night, that I had another object in view, besides the object of earning my living on the stage———'

'I beg your pardon,' interposed Captain Wragge. 'Did you say, earning your living?'

'Certainly. Both my sister and myself must depend on our own exertions to gain our daily bread.'

'What!!!' cried the captain, starting to his feet. 'The daughters of my wealthy and lamented relative by marriage, reduced to earn their own living? Impossible—wildly, extravagantly impossible!' He sat down again, and looked at Magdalen as if she had inflicted a personal injury on him.

'You are not acquainted with the full extent of our misfortune,' she said, quietly. 'I will tell you what has happened before I go any farther.' She told him at once, in the plainest terms she could find, and with as few details as possible.

Captain Wragge's profound bewilderment left him conscious of but one distinct result, produced by the narrative on his own mind. The lawyer's offer of Fifty Pounds Reward for the missing young lady, ascended instantly to a place in his estimation which it had never occupied until that moment.

'Do I understand,' he inquired, 'that you are entirely deprived of present resources?'

'I have sold my jewelry and my dresses,' said Magdalen, impatient of his mean harping on the pecuniary string. 'If my want of experience keeps me back in a theatre, I can afford to wait till the stage can afford to pay me.'

Captain Wragge mentally appraised the rings, bracelets, and necklaces, the silks, satins, and laces of the daughter of a gentleman of fortune, at—say, a third of their real value. In a moment more, the Fifty Pounds Reward suddenly sank again to the lowest depths in the deep estimation of this judicious man.

'Just so,' he said, in his most business-like manner. 'There is not the least fear, my dear girl, of your being kept back in a theatre, if you possess present resources, and if you profit by my assistance.'

'I must accept more assistance than you have already offered—or none,' said Magdalen. 'I have more serious difficulties before me than the difficulty of leaving York, and the difficulty of finding my way to the stage.'

'You don't say so! I am all attention; pray explain yourself!'

She considered her next words carefully before they passed her tips.

'There are certain inquiries,' she said, 'which I am interested in making. If I undertook them myself, I should excite the suspicion of the person inquired after, and should learn litde or nothing of what I wish to know. If the inquiries could be made by a stranger, without my being seen in the matter, a service would be rendered me of much greater importance than the service you offered last night.'

Captain Wragge's vagabond face became gravely and deeply attentive.

'May I ask,' he said, 'what the nature of the inquiries is likely to be?'

Magdalen hesitated. She had necessarily mentioned Michael Vanstone's name, in informing the captain of the loss of her inheritance. She must inevitably mention it to him again, if she employed his services. He would doubtless discover it for himself, by a plain process of inference, before she said many words more, frame them as carefully as she might. Under these circumstances was there any intelligible reason for shrinking from direct reference to Michael Vanstone? No intelligible reason—and yet, she shrank.

'For instance,' pursued Captain Wragge, 'are they inquiries about a man or a woman; inquiries about an enemy or a friend———?'

'An enemy,' she answered quickly.

Her reply might still have kept the captain in the dark—but her eyes enlightened him. 'Michael Vanstone!' thought the wary Wragge. 'She looks dangerous; I'll feel my way a litde farther.'

'With regard, now, to the person who is the object of these inquiries,' he resumed. 'Are you thoroughly clear, in your own mind, about what you want to know?'

'Perfectly clear,' replied Magdalen. 'I want to know where he lives, to begin with?'

'Yes? And after that?'

'I want to know about his habits; about who the people are whom he associates with; about what he does with his money———' She considered a little. 'And one thing more,' she said; 'I want to know whether there is any woman about his house—a relation, or a housekeeper—who has an influence over him.'

'Harmless enough, so far,' said the captain. 'What next?'

'Nothing. The rest is my secret.'

The clouds on Captain Wragge's countenance began to clear away again. He reverted with his customary

precision to his customary choice of alternatives. ‘These inquiries of hers,’ he thought, ‘mean one of two things —Mischief, or Money! If it’s Mischief, I’ll slip through her fingers. If it’s Money, I’ll make myself useful, with a view to the future.’

Magdalen’s vigilant eyes watched the progress of his reflections suspiciously. ‘Captain Wragge,’ she said, ‘if you want time to consider, say so plainly.’

‘I don’t want a moment,’ replied the captain. ‘Place your departure from York, your dramatic career, and your private inquiries under my care. Here I am, unreservedly at your disposal. Say the word—do you take me?’

Her heart beat fast; her lips turned dry—but she said the word.

‘I do.’

There was a pause. Magdalen sat silent, struggling with the vague dread of the future which had been roused in her mind by her own reply. Captain Wragge, on his side, was apparently absorbed in the consideration of a new set of alternatives. His hands descended into his empty pockets, and prophetically tested their capacity as receptacles for gold and silver. The brightness of the precious metals was in his face, the smoothness of the precious metals was in his voice, as he provided himself with a new supply of words, and resumed the conversation.

‘The next question,’ he said, ‘is the question of time. Do these confidential investigations of ours require immediate attention—or can they wait?’

‘For the present they can wait,’ replied Magdalen. ‘I wish to secure my freedom from all interference on the part of my friends, before the inquiries are made.’

‘Very good. The first step towards accomplishing that object is to beat our retreat—excuse a professional metaphor from a military man—to beat our retreat from York to-morrow. I see my way plainly so far; but I am all abroad, as we used to say in the militia, about my marching orders afterwards. The next direction we take, ought to be chosen with an eye to advancing your dramatic views. I am all ready, when I know what your views are. How came you to think of the theatre at all? I see the sacred fire burning in you; tell me, who lit it?’

Magdalen could only answer him in one way. She could only look back at the days that were gone for ever; and tell him the story of her first step towards the stage at Evergreen Lodge. Captain Wragge listened with his usual politeness; but he evidently derived no satisfactory impression from what he heard. Audiences of friends, were audiences whom he privately declined to trust; and the opinion of the stage-manager, was .the opinion of a man who spoke with his fee in his pocket, and his eye on a future engagement.

‘Interesting, deeply interesting,’ he said, when Magdalen had done. ‘But not conclusive to a practical man. A specimen of your abilities is necessary to enlighten me. I have been on the stage myself; the comedy of the Rivals is familiar to me from beginning to end. A sample is all I want, if you have not forgotten the words—a sample of “Lucy,” and a sample of “Julia.” ’

‘I have not forgotten the words,’ said Magdalen, sorrowfully; ‘and I have the little books with me, in which my dialogue was written out. I have never parted with them: they remind me of a time———’ Her lip trembled; and a pang of the heartache silenced her.

‘Nervous,’ remarked the captain, indulgently. ‘Not at all a bad sign. The greatest actresses on the stage are nervous. Follow their example, and get over it. Where are the parts? Oh, here they are! Very nicely written, and remarkably clean. I’ll give you the cues—it will all be over (as the dentists say), in no time. Take the back

drawing-room for the stage, and take me for the audience. Tingle goes the bell; up runs the curtain; order in the gallery, silence in the pit—enter Lucy!'

She tried hard to control herself; she forced back the sorrow—the innocent, natural, human sorrow for the absent and the dead—pleading hard with her for the tears that she refused. Resolutely, with cold clenched hands, she tried to begin. As the first familiar words passed her lips, Frank came back to her from the sea; and the face of her dead father looked at her with the smile of happy old times. The voices of her mother and her sister talked gently in the fragrant country stillness; and the garden-walks at Combe-Raven opened once more on her view. With a faint wailing cry, she dropped into a chair; her head fell forward on the table, and she burst passionately into tears.

Captain Wragge was on his feet in a moment. She shuddered as he came near her; and waved him back vehemently with her hand. 'Leave me!' she said; 'leave me a minute by myself!' The compliant Wragge retired to the front room; looked out of window; and whistled under his breath. 'The family spirit again!' he said. 'Complicated by hysterics.'

After waiting a minute or two, he returned to make inquiries.

'Is there anything I can offer you?' he asked. 'Cold water? burnt feathers? smelling salts? medical assistance? Shall I summon Mrs. Wragge? Shall we put it off till to-morrow?'

She started up, wild and flushed, with a desperate self-command in her face, with an angry resolution in her manner.

'No!' she said. 'I must harden myself—and I will! Sit down again, and see me act.'

'Bravo!' cried the captain. 'Dash at it, my beauty—and it's done!'

She dashed at it, with a mad defiance of herself—with a raised voice, and a glow like fever in her cheeks. All the ardess, girlish charm of the performance in happier and better days, was gone. The native dramatic capacity that was in her, came, hard and bold, to the surface, stripped of every softening allurement which had once adorned it. She would have saddened and disappointed a man with any delicacy of feeling. She absolutely electrified Captain Wragge. He forgot his politeness, he forgot his long words. The essential spirit of the man's whole vagabond life, burst out of him irresistibly in his first exclamation. 'Who the devil would have thought it? She *can* act, after all!' The instant the words escaped his lips, he recovered himself, and glided off into his ordinary colloquial channels. Magdalen stopped him in the middle of his first compliment. 'No,' she said; 'I have forced the truth out of you, for once. I want no more.'

'Pardon me,' replied the incorrigible Wragge. 'You want a little instruction; and I am the man to give it you.'

With that answer, he placed a chair for her, and proceeded to explain himself.

She sat down in silence. A sullen indifference began to show itself in her manner; her cheeks turned pale again; and her eyes looked wearily vacant at the wall before her. Captain Wragge noticed these signs of heart-sickness and discontent with herself, after the effort she had made, and saw the importance of rousing her by speaking, for once,, plainly and directly to the point. She had set a new value on herself in his mercenary eyes. She had suggested to him a speculation in her youth, her beauty, and her marked ability for the stage, which had never entered his mind until he saw her act. The old militiaman was quick at his shifts. He and his plans had both turned right about together, when Magdalen sat down to hear what he had to say.

'Mr. Huxtable's opinion is my opinion,' he began. 'You are a born actress. But you must be trained before you

can do anything on the stage. I am disengaged—I am competent—I have trained others—I can train you. Don't trust my word: trust my eye to my own interests. I'll make it my interest to take pains with you, and to be quick about it. You shall pay me for my instructions from your profits on the stage. Half your salary, for the first year; a third of your salary for the second year; and half the sum you clear by your first benefit in a London theatre.* What do you say to that? Have I made it my interest to push you, or have I not?'

So far as appearances went, and so far as the stage went, it was plain that he had linked his interests and Magdalen's together. She briefly told him so, and waited to hear more.

'A month or six weeks' study,' continued the captain, 'will give me a reasonable idea of what you can do best. All ability runs in grooves; and your groove remains to be found. We can't find it here—for we can't keep you a close prisoner for weeks together in Rosemary Lane. A quiet country place, secure from all interference and interruption, is the place we want for a month certain. Trust my knowledge of Yorkshire; and consider the place found. I see no difficulties anywhere, except the difficulty of beating our retreat to-morrow.'

'I thought your arrangements were made last night?' said Magdalen.

'Quite right,' rejoined the captain. 'They were made last night; and here they are. We can't leave by railway, because the lawyer's clerk is sure to be on the look-out for you at the York terminus. Very good; we take to the road instead, and leave in our own carriage. Where the deuce do we get it? We get it from the landlady's brother, who has a horse and chaise which he lets out for hire. That chaise comes to the end of Rosemary Lane at an early hour to-morrow morning. I take my wife and my niece out to show them the beauties of the neighbourhood. We have a picnic hamper with us which marks our purpose in the public eye. You disfigure yourself in a shawl, bonnet, and veil of Mrs. Wragge's; we turn our backs on York; and away we drive on a pleasure trip for the day—you and I on the front seat, Mrs. Wragge and the hamper behind. Good again. Once on the high road what do we do? Drive to the first station beyond York, northward, southward, or eastward, as may be hereafter determined. No lawyer's clerk is waiting for you there. You and Mrs. Wragge get out—first opening the hamper at a convenient opportunity. Instead of containing chickens and champagne, it contains a carpet-bag with the things you want for the night. You take your tickets for a place previously determined on; and I take the chaise back to York. Arrived once more in this house, I collect the luggage left behind, and send for the woman downstairs. "Ladies so charmed with such-and-such-a-place (wrong place of course) that they have determined to stop there. Pray accept the customary week's rent, in place of a week's warning. Good day.' Is the clerk looking for *me* at the York terminus? Not he. I take my ticket, under his very nose; I follow you with the luggage along your line of railway—and where is the trace left of your departure? Nowhere. The fairy has vanished; and the legal authorities are left in the lurch.'

'Why do you talk of difficulties?' asked Magdalen. 'The difficulties seem to be provided for.'

'All but One,' said Captain Wragge, with an ominous emphasis on the last word. 'The Grand Difficulty of humanity from the cradle to the grave—Money.' He slowly winked his green eye; sighed with deep feeling; and buried his insolvent hands in his unproductive pockets.

'What is the money wanted for?' inquired Magdalen. 'To pay my bills,' replied the captain, with a touching simplicity. 'Pray understand! I never was—and never shall be—personally desirous of paying a single farthing to any human creature on the habitable globe. I am speaking in your interests, not in mine.'

'My interest?'

'Certainly. You can't get safely away from York to-morrow, without the chaise. And I can't get the chaise without money. The landlady's brother will lend it, if he sees his sister's bill receipted, and if he gets his day's

hire beforehand—not otherwise. Allow me to put the transaction in a business light. We have agreed that I am to be remunerated for my course of dramatic instruction out of your future earnings on the stage. Very good. I merely draw on my future prospects; and you, on whom those prospects depend, are naturally my banker. For mere argument's sake, estimate my share in your first year's salary at the totally inadequate value of a hundred pounds. Halve that sum; quarter that sum———'

'How much do you want?' said Magdalen, impatiendy.

Captain Wragge was sorely tempted to take the Reward at the top of the handbills as his basis of calculation. But he felt the vast future importance of present moderation; and actually wanting some twelve or thirteen pounds, he merely doubled the amount, and said, 'Five-and-twenty.'

Magdalen took the little bag from her bosom, and gave him the money, with a contemptuous wonder at the number of words which he had wasted on her for the purpose of cheating on so small a scale. In the old days at Combe-Raven, five-and-twenty pounds flowed from a stroke of her father's pen into the hands of any one in the house who chose to ask for it.

Captain Wragge's eyes dwelt on the litde bag, as the eyes of lovers dwell on their mistresses. 'Happy bag!' he murmured, as she put it back in her bosom. He rose; dived into a corner of the room; produced his neat despatch-box; and solemnly unlocked it on the table between Magdalen and himself.

'The nature of the man, my dear girl—the nature of the man,' he said, opening one of his plump little books, bound in calf and vellum. 'A transaction has taken place between us. I must have it down in black and white.' He opened the book at a blank page, and wrote at the top, in a fine mercantile hand*:—'Miss Vanstone the Younger: In account with Horatio Wragge, late of the Royal Militia. D*T.*—C*r. *Sept*. 24*th*, 1846. *D*r.*: To estimated value of H. Wragge's interest in Miss V.'s first year's salary—say £200. C*T. *By paid on account £25.'* Having completed the entry—and having also shown, by doubling his original estimate on the Debtor side, that Magdalen's easy compliance with his demand on her had not been thrown away on him—the captain pressed his blotting-paper over the wet ink, and put away the book with the air of a man who had done a virtuous action, and who was above boasting about it.

'Excuse me for leaving you abruptly,' he said. 'Time is of importance; I must make sure of the chaise. If Mrs. Wragge comes in, tell her nothing—she is not sharp enough to be trusted. If she presumes to ask questions, extinguish her immediately. You have only to be loud. Pray take my authority into your own hands, and be as loud with Mrs. Wragge as I am!' He snatched up his tall hat, bowed, smiled, and tripped out of the room.

Sensible of little else but of the relief of being alone; feehng no more distinct impression than the vague sense of some serious change having taken place in herself and her position, Magdalen let the events of the morning come and go like shadows on her mind, and waited wearily for what the day might bring forth. After the lapse of some time, the door opened softly. The giant figure of Mrs. Wragge stalked into the room; and stopped opposite Magdalen in solemn astonishment.

'Where are your Things?' asked Mrs. Wragge, with a burst of incontrollable anxiety. 'I've been upstairs, looking in your drawers. Where are your night-gowns and nightcaps? and your petticoats and stockings? and your hairpins and bear's grease, and all the rest of it?'

'My luggage is left at the railway-station,' said Magdalen.

Mrs. Wragge's moon-face brightened dimly. The ineradicable female instinct of Curiosity tried to sparkle in her faded blue eyes—flickered piteously—and died out.

‘How much luggage?’ she asked, confidentially. ‘The captain’s gone out. Let’s go and get it!’

‘Mrs. Wragge!’ cried a terrible voice at the door.

For the first time in Magdalen’s experience, Mrs. Wragge was deaf to the customary stimulant. She actually ventured on a feeble remonstrance, in the presence of her husband.

‘Oh, do let her have her Things!’ pleaded Mrs. Wragge. ‘Oh, poor soul, do let her have her Things!’

The captain’s inexorable forefinger pointed to a comer of the room—dropped slowly as his wife retired before it—and suddenly stopped at the region of her shoes.

‘Do I hear a clapping on the floor!’ exclaimed Captain Wragge, with an expression of horror. ‘Yes; I do. Down at heel again! The left shoe, this time. Pull it up, Mrs. Wragge! pull it up! The chaise will be here to-morrow morning at nine o’clock,’ he continued, addressing Magdalen. ‘We can’t possibly venture on claiming your box. There is note-paper. Write down a list of the necessaries you want. I will take it myself to the shop, pay the bill for you, and bring back the parcel. We must sacrifice the box—we must indeed.’

While her husband was addressing Magdalen, Mrs. Wragge had stolen out again from her comer; and had ventured near enough to the captain to hear the words, ‘shop’ and ‘parcel.’ She clapped her great hands together in ungovernable excitement, and lost all control over herself immediately.

‘Oh, if it’s shopping, let me do it!’ cried Mrs. Wragge. ‘She’s going out to buy her Things! Oh, let me go with her—please let me go with her!’

‘Sit down!’ shouted the captain. ‘Straight! more to the right—more still. Stop where you are!’

Mrs. Wragge crossed her helpless hands on her lap, and melted meekly into tears.

‘I do so like shopping,’ pleaded the poor creature; ‘and I get so little of it now!’

Magdalen completed her list; and Captain Wragge at once left the room with it. ‘Don’t let my wife bore you,’ he said pleasandy, as he went out. ‘Cut her short, poor soul—cut her short!’

‘Don’t cry,’ said Magdalen, trying to comfort Mrs. Wragge by patting her on the shoulder. ‘When the parcel comes back you shall open it.’

‘Thank you, my dear,’ said Mrs. Wragge, meekly drying her eyes; ‘thank you kindly. Don’t notice my handkerchief, please. It’s such a very little one! I had a nice lot of them once, with lace borders. They’re all gone now. Never mind! It will comfort me to unpack your Things. You’re very good to me. I like you. I say—you won’t be angry, will you? Give us a kiss.’

Magdalen stooped over her with the frank grace and gendeness of past days, and touched her faded cheek. ‘Let me do something harmless!’ she thought, with a pang at her heart—‘Oh let me do something innocent and kind, for the sake of old times!’

She felt her eyes moistening, and silently turned away.

That night no rest came to her. That night the roused forces of Good and Evil fought their terrible fight for her soul—and left the strife between them still in suspense when morning came. As the clock of York Minister struck nine, she followed Mrs. Wragge to the chaise, and took her seat by the captain’s side. In a quarter of an hour more, York was in the distance; and the high-road lay bright and open before them in the morning sunlight.

the end of the second scene

Between the Scenes

Chronicle of Events: Preserved in Captain Wragge's Despatch Box

Wilkie Collins

I. *Chronicle for October, 1846*

I have retired into the bosom of my family. We tire residing in the secluded village of Ruswarp, on the banks of the Esk, about two miles inland from Whitby. Our lodgings are comfortable, and we possess the additional blessing of a tidy landlady. Mrs. Wragge and Miss Vanstone preceded me here, in accordance with the plan I laid down for effecting our retreat from York. On the next day I followed them alone, with the luggage. On leaving the terminus, I had the satisfaction of seeing the lawyer's clerk in close confabulation with the detective officer whose advent I had prophesied. I left him in peaceable possession of the city of York, and the whole surrounding neighbourhood. He has returned the compliment, and has left us in peaceable possession of the valley of the Esk, thirty miles away from him.

Remarkable results have followed my first efforts at the cultivation of Miss Vanstone's dramatic abilities.

I have discovered that she possesses extraordinary talent as a mimic. She has the flexible face, the manageable voice, and the dramatic knack which fit a woman for character-parts and disguises on the stage. All she now wants is teaching and practice to make her sure of her own resources. The experience of her, thus gained, has revived an idea in my mind, which originally occurred to me at one of the 'At Homes' of the late inimitable Charles Mathews, comedian.* I was in the Wine Trade at the time, I remember. We imitated the Vintage-processes of Nature, in a back-kitchen at Brompton; and produced a dinner-sherry, pale and curious, tonic in character, round in the mouth, a favourite with the Court of Spain, at nineteen and sixpence a dozen, botdes included—*Vide* Prospectus of the period. The profits of myself and partners were small; we were in advance of the tastes of the age, and in debt to the bottle merchant. Being at my wits' end for want of money, and seeing what audiences Mathews drew, the idea occurred to me of starting an imitation of the great Imitator himself, in the shape of an 'At Home,' given by a woman. The one trifling obstacle in the way was the difficulty of finding the woman. From that time to this, I have hitherto failed to overcome it. I have conquered it at last: I have found the woman now. Miss Vanstone possesses youth and beauty as well as talent. Train her in the art of dramatic disguise; provide her with appropriate dresses for different characters; develop her accomplishments in singing and playing; give her plenty of smart talk addressed to the audience; advertise her as A Young Lady at Home; astonish the public by a dramatic entertainment which depends from first to last on that young lady's own sole exertions; commit the entire management of the thing to my care—and what follows as a necessary consequence? Fame for my fair relative, and a fortune for myself.

I put these considerations, as frankly as usual, to Miss Vanstone; offering to write the Entertainment, to manage all the business, and to share the profits. I did not forget to strengthen my case by informing her of the jealousies she would encounter, and the obstacles she would meet, if she went on the stage. And I wound up by a neat reference to the private inquiries which she is interested in making, and to the personal independence which she is desirous of securing before she acts on her information. 'If you go on the stage,' I said, 'your services will be bought by a manager, and he may insist on his claims just at the time when you want to get free from him. If, on the contrary, you adopt my views, you will be your own mistress and your own manager, and you can settle your course just as you like.' This last consideration appeared to strike her. She took a day to consider it; and when the day was over, gave her consent.

I had the whole transaction down in black and white immediately. Our arrangement is eminently satisfactory, except in one particular. She shows a morbid distrust of writing her name at the bottom of any document which I present to her; and roundly declares she will sign nothing. As long as it is her interest to provide herself with pecuniary resources for the future, she verbally engages to go on. When it ceases to be her interest, she plainly threatens to leave off at a week's notice. A difficult girl to deal with: she has found out her own value to me already. One comfort is, I have the cooking of the accounts; and my fair relative shall not fill her pockets too suddenly, if I can help it.

My exertions in training Miss Vanstone for the coming experiment, have been varied by the writing of two anonymous letters, in that young lady's interests. Finding her too fidgety about arranging matters with her friends to pay proper attention to my instructions, I wrote anonymously to the lawyer who is conducting the inquiry after her; recommending him in a friendly way to give it up. The letter was enclosed to a friend of mine in London, with instructions to post it at Charing Cross. A week later, I sent a second letter, through the same channel, requesting the lawyer to inform me, in writing, whether he and his clients had or had not decided on taking my advice. I directed him, with jocose reference to the collision of interests between us, to address his letter:—'Tit for Tat, Post Office, West Strand.'

In a few days the answer arrived—privately forwarded, of course, to Post Office, Whitby, by arrangement with my friend in London.

The lawyer's reply was short and surly: 'Sir—If my advice had been followed, you and your annoymous letter would both be treated with the contempt which they deserve. But the wishes of Miss Magdalen Vanstone's eldest sister have claims on my consideration which I cannot dispute; and at her entreaty I inform you that all further proceedings on my part are withdrawn—on the express understanding that this concession is to open facilities for written communication at least, between the two sisters. A letter from the elder Miss Vanstone is enclosed in this. If I don't hear in a week's time, that it has been received, I shall place the matter once more in the hands of the police.—William Pendril.' A sour man, this William Pendril. I can only say of him, what an eminent nobleman once said of his sulky servant—'I wouldn't have such a temper as that fellow has got, for any earthly consideration that could be offered me!'

As a matter of course, I looked into the letter which the lawyer enclosed, before delivering it. Miss Vanstone, the elder, described herself as distracted at not hearing from her sister; as suited with a governess's situation in a private family; as going into the situation in a week's time; and as longing for a letter to comfort her, before she faced the trial of undertaking her new duties. After closing the envelope again, I accompanied the delivery of the letter to Miss Vanstone the younger, by a word of caution. 'Are you more sure of your own courage now,' I said, 'than you were when I met you?' She was ready with her answer. 'Captain Wragge, when you met me on the Walls of York, I had not gone too far to go back. I have gone too far now.'

If she really feels this—and I think she does—her corresponding with her sister can do no harm. She wrote at

great length the same day; cried profusely over her own epistolary composition; and was remarkably ill-tempered and snappish towards me, when we met in the evening. She wants experience, poor girl—she sadly wants experience of the world. How consoling to know that I am just the man to give it her!

II. *Chronicle for November*

We are established at Derby. The Entertainment is written; and the rehearsals are in steady progress. All difficulties are provided for, but the one eternal difficulty of money. Miss Vanstone's resources stretch easily enough to the limits of our personal wants; including pianoforte hire for practice, and the purchase and making of the necessary dresses. But the expenses of starting the Entertainment are beyond the reach of any means we possess. A theatrical friend of mine here, whom I had hoped to interest in our undertaking, proves unhappily to be at a crisis in his career. The field of human sympathy, out of which I might have raised the needful pecuniary crop, is closed to me from want of time to cultivate it. I see no other resource left—if we are to be ready by Christmas—than to try one of the local music-sellers in this town, who is said to be a speculating man. A private rehearsal at these lodgings, and a bargain which will fill the pockets of a grasping stranger—such are the sacrifices which dire necessity imposes on me at starting. Well! there is only one consolation: I'll cheat the music-seller.

III. *Chronicle for December. First Fortnight*

The music-seller extorts my unwilling respect. He is one of the very few human beings I have met with in the course of my life who is not to be cheated. He has taken a masterly advantage of our helplessness; and has imposed temis on us, for performances at Derby and Nottingham, with Such a business-like disregard of all interests but his own, that—fond as I tun of putting things down in black and white—I really cannot prevail upon myself to record the bargain. It is needless to say, I have yielded with my best grace; sharing with my fair relative the wretched pecuniary prospects offered to us. Our turn will come. In the mean time, I cordially regret not having known the local music-seller in early life.

Personally speaking, I have no cause to complain of Miss Vanstone. We have arranged that she shall regularly forward her address (at the post office) to her friends, as we move about from place to place. Besides communicating in this way with her sister, she also reports herself to a certain Mr. Clare, residing in Somersetshire, who is to forward all letters exchanged between herself and his son. Careful inquiry has informed me that this latter individual is now in China. Having suspected, from the first, that there was a gendeman in the background, it is highly satisfactory to know that he recedes into the remote perspective of Asia. Long may he remain there!

The trifling responsibility of finding a name for our talented Magdalen to perform under, has been cast on my shoulders. She feels no interest whatever in this part of the subject. 'Give me any name you like,' she said; 'I have as much right to one as to another. Make it yourself.' I have readily consented to gratify her wishes. The resources of my commercial library include a list of useful names to assume; and we can choose one at five minutes' notice, when the admirable man of business who now oppresses us is ready to issue his advertisements. On this point my mind is easy enough: all my anxieties centre in the fair performer. I have not the least doubt

she will do wonders if she is only left to herself on the first night. But if the day's post is mischievous enough to upset her by a letter from her sister, I tremble for the consequences.

IV. *Chronicle for December. Second Fortnight*

My gifted relative has made her first appearance in public, and has laid the foundation of our future fortunes.

On the first night, the attendance was larger than I had ventured to hope. The novelty of an evening's entertainment, conducted from beginning to end by the unaided exertions of a young lady (see advertisement) roused the public curiosity, and the seats were moderately well filled. As good luck would have it, no letter addressed to Miss Vanstone came that day. She was in full possession of herself, until she got the first dress on, and heard the bell ring for the music. At that critical moment she suddenly broke down. I found her alone in the waiting room, sobbing, and talking like a child. 'Oh, poor papa! poor papa! Oh, my God, if he saw me now!' My experience in such matters at once informed me that it was a case of salvolatile, accompanied by sound advice. We strung her up, in no time, to concert pitch; set her eyes in a blaze; and made her outblush her own rouge. The curtain rose when we had got her at a red heat. She dashed at it, exactly as she dashed at it in the back drawing-room at Rosemary Lane. Her personal appearance settled the question of her reception before she opened her lips. She rushed full gallop through her changes of character, her songs, and her dialogue; making mistakes by the dozen, and never stopping to set them right; carrying the people along with her in a perfect whirlwind, and never waiting for the applause. The whole thing was over twenty minutes sooner than the time we had calculated on. She carried it through to the end; and fainted on the waiting-room sofa, a minute after the curtain was down. The music-seller having taken leave of his senses from sheer astonishment; and I having no evening costume to appear in—we sent the doctor to make the necessary apology to the public, who were calling for her till the place rang again. I prompted our medical orator with a neat speech from behind the curtain; and I never heard such applause, from such a comparatively small audience, before in my life. I felt the tribute—I felt it deeply. Fourteen years ago I scraped together the wretched means of existence, in this very town, by reading the newspaper (with explanatory comments) to the company at a public-house. And now, here I am at the top of the tree.

It is needless to say that my first proceeding was to bowl out the music-seller on the spot. He called the next morning, no doubt with a liberal proposal for extending the engagement beyond Derby and Nottingham. My niece was described as not well enough to see him; and, when he asked for me, he was told I was not up. I happened to be, at that moment, engaged in putting the case pathetically to our gifted Magdalen. Her answer was in the highest degree satisfactory. She would permanently engage herself to nobody—least of all to a man who had taken sordid advantage of her position and mine. She would be her own mistress, and share the profits with me, while she wanted money, and while it suited her to go on. So far so good. But the reason she added next, for her flattering preference of myself, was less to my taste. 'The music-seller is not the man whom I employ to make my inquiries,' she said. 'You are the man.' I don't like her steadily remembering those inquiries, in the first bewilderment of her success. It looks ill for the future; it looks infernally ill for the future.

V. *Chronicle for January, 1847*

She has shown the cloven foot already. I begin to be a litde afraid of her.

On the conclusion of the Nottingham engagement (the results of which more than equalled the results at Derby), I proposed taking the entertainment next—now we had got it into our own hands—to Newark. Miss Vanstone raised no objection, until we came to the question of time, when she amazed me by stipulating for a week's delay, before we appeared in public again.

'For what possible purpose?' I asked.

'For the purpose of making the inquiries which I mentioned to you at York,' she answered.

I instantly enlarged on the danger of delay; putting all the considerations before her in every imaginable form. She remained perfectly immovable. I tried to shake her on the question of expenses. She answered by handing me over her share of the proceeds at Derby and Nottingham—and there were my expenses paid, at the rate of nearly two guineas a day. I wonder who first picked out a mule as the type of obstinacy? How little knowledge that man must have had of women!

There was no help for it. I took down my instructions in black and white, as usual. My first exertions were to be directed to the discovery of Mr. Michael Vanstone's address: I was also expected to find out how long he was likely to live there, and whether he had sold Combe-Raven or not. My next inquiries were to inform me of his ordinary habits of life; of what he did with his money; of who his intimate friends were; and of the sort of terms on which his son, Mr. Noel Vanstone, was now living with him. Lastly, the investigations were to end in discovering whether there was any female relative, or any woman exercising domestic authority in the house, who was known to have an influence over either father or son.

If my long practice in cultivating the field of human sympathy had not accustomed me to private investigations into the affairs of other people, I might have found some of these queries rather difficult to deal with in the course of a week. As it was, I gave myself all the benefit of my own experience; and brought the answers back to Nottingham in a day less than the given time. Here they are, in regular order, for convenience of future reference:—

(1.) Mr. Michael Vanstone is now residing at German Place, Brighton, and likely to remain there; as he finds the air suits him. He reached London from Switzerland in September last; and sold the Combe-Raven property immediately on his arrival.

(2.) His ordinary habits of fife are secret and retired; he seldom visits, or receives company. Part of his money is supposed to be in the funds, and part laid out in railway investments, which have survived the panic of eighteen hundred and forty-six, and are rapidly rising in value. He is said to be a bold speculator. Since his arrival in England he has invested with great judgment in house property. He has some houses in remote parts of London; and some houses in certain watering-places on the east coast, which are shown to be advancing in public repute. In all these cases he is reported to have made remarkably good bargains.

(3.) It is not easy to discover who his intimate friends are. Two names only have been ascertained. The first is Admiral Bartram; supposed to have been under friendly obligations, in past years, to Mr. Michael Vanstone. The second is Mr. George Bartram, nephew of the Admiral, and now staying on a short visit in the house at German Place. Mr. George Bartram is the son of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone's sister, also deceased. He is therefore a cousin of Mr. Noel Vanstone's. This last—viz., Mr. Noel Vanstone—is in delicate health, and is living on excellent terms with his father, in German Place.

(4.) There is no female relative in Mr. Michael Vanstone's family circle. But there is a housekeeper who has

lived in his service ever since his wife's death, and who has acquired a strong influence over both father and son. She is a native of Switzerland, elderly, and a widow. Her name is Mrs. Lecount.

On placing these particulars in Miss Vanstone's hands, she made no remark, except to thank me. I endeavoured to invite her confidence. No results; nothing but a renewal of civility, and a sudden shifting to the subject of the Entertainment. Very good. If she won't give me the information I want, the conclusion is obvious—I must help myself.

Business considerations claim the remainder of this page. Let me return to business.

Financial Statement	Third Week in January
Place Visited Newark	Performances Two
Net Receipts In black and white £25	Net Receipts Actually Realized £32 10*s*
Apparent Division of Profits Miss V £12 10 Self £12 10	Actual Division of Profits Miss V £12 10 Self £20 0
Private Surplus on the Week, Or say, Self-presented Testimonial. £7 10*s*	
Audited, H. Wragge.	Passed correct, H. Wragge.

The next stronghold of British sympathy which we take by storm is Sheffield. We open the first week in February.

VI. *Chronicle for February*

Practice has now given my fair relative the confidence which I predicted would come with time. Her knack of disguising her own identity in the impersonation of different characters, so completely staggers her audiences, that the same people come twice over, to find out how she does it. It is the amiable defect of the English public

never to know when they have had enough of a good thing. They actually try to encore one of her characters—an old north-country lady; modelled on that honoured preceptress in the late Mr. Vanstone's family, to whom I presented myself at Combe-Raven. This particular performance fairly amazes the people. I don't wonder at it. Such an extraordinary assumption of age by a girl of nineteen, has never been seen in public before, in the whole course of my theatrical experience.

I find myself writing in a lower tone than usual; I miss my own dash of humour. The fact is, I am depressed about the future. In the very height of our prosperity, my perverse pupil sticks to her trumpery family quarrel. I feel myself at the mercy of the first whim in the Vanstone direction which may come into her head—I, the architect of her fortunes. Too bad; upon my soul, too bad.

She has acted already on the inquiries which she forced me to make for her. She has written two letters to Mr. Michael Vanstone.

To the first letter no answer came. To the second a reply was received. Her infernal cleverness put an obstacle I had not expected in the way of my intercepting it. Later in the day, after she had herself opened and read the answer, I laid another trap for her. It just succeeded, and no more. I had half a minute to look into the envelope in her absence. It contained nothing but her own letter returned. She is not the girl to put up quietly with such an insult as this. Mischief will come of it—Mischief to Michael Vanstone—which is of no earthly consequence; mischief to Me—which is a truly serious matter.

VII. *Chronicle for March*

After performing at Sheffield and Manchester, we have moved to Liverpool, Preston, and Lancaster. Another change in this weathercock of a girl. She has written no more letters to Michael Vanstone; and she has become as anxious to make money as I am myself. We are realizing large profits, and we are worked to death. I don't like this change in her: she has a purpose to answer, or she would not show such extraordinary eagerness to fill her purse. Nothing I can do—no cooking of accounts; no self-presented testimonials—can keep that purse empty. The success of the Entertainment, and her own sharpness in looking after her interests, literally force me into a course of comparative honesty. She puts into her pocket more than a third of the profits, in defiance of my most arduous exertions to prevent her. And this at my age! this after my long and successful career as a moral agriculturist! Marks of admiration are very little things; but they express my feelings, and I put them in freely.

VIII. *Chronicle for April and May*

We have visited seven more large towns, and are now at Birmingham. Consulting my books, I find that Miss Vanstone has realized by the Entertainment, up to this time, the enormous sum of nearly four hundred pounds. It is quite possible that my own profits may reach one or two miserable hundreds more. But I am the architect of her fortunes—the publisher, so to speak, of her book—and, if anything, I am underpaid.

I made the above discovery on the twenty-ninth of the month—anniversary of the Restoration of my royal predecessor in the field of human sympathy, Charles the Second. I had barely finished looking up my despatch box—when the ungrateful girl, whose reputation I have made, came into the room; and told me in so many

words, that the business connection between us was for the present at an end.

I attempt no description of my own sensations: I merely record facts. She informed me, with an appearance of perfect composure, that she needed rest, and that she had ‘new objects in view.’ She might possibly want me to assist those objects; and she might possibly return to the Entertainment. In either case it would be enough if we exchanged addresses, at which we could write to each other, in case of need. Having no desire to leave me too abruptly, she would remain the next day (which was Sunday); and would take her departure on Monday morning. Such was her explanation, in so many words.

Remonstrance, as I knew by experience, would be thrown away. Authority I had none to exert. My one sensible course to take in this emergency was to find out which way my own interests pointed—and to go that way without a moment’s unnecessary hesitation.

A very little reflection has since convinced me that she has a deep-laid scheme against Michael Vanstone in view. She is young, handsome, clever, and unscrupulous; she has made money to live on, and has time at her disposal to find out the weak side of an old man; and she is going to attack Mr. Michael Vanstone unawares with the legitimate weapons of her sex. Is she likely to want *me* for such a purpose as this? Doubtful. Is she merely anxious to get rid of me on easy terms? Probable. Am I the sort of man to be treated in this way by my own pupil? Decidedly not: I am the man to see my way through a neat succession of alternatives; and here they are:—

First alternative:—To announce my compliance with her proposal; to exchange addresses with her; and then to keep my eye privately on all her future movements. Second alternative:—To express fond anxiety in a paternal capacity; and to threaten giving the alarm to her sister and the lawyer, if she persists in her design. Third alternative:—To turn the information I already possess to the best account, by making it a marketable commodity between Mr. Michael Vanstone and myself. At present, I incline towards the last of these three courses. But my decision is far too important to be hurried. To-day is only the twenty-ninth. I will suspend my Chronicle of Events until Monday.

May 31st.—My alternatives and her plans are both overthrown together.

The newspaper came in, as usual, after breakfast. I looked it over, and discovered this memorable entry, among the obituary announcements of the day:—

‘On the 29th inst., at Brighton, Michael Vanstone, Esq., formerly of Zurich, aged 77.’

Miss Vanstone was present in the room, when I read those two startling lines. Her bonnet was on; her boxes were packed; she was waiting impatiently until it was time to go to the train. I handed the paper to her, without a word on my side. Without a word on hers, she looked where I pointed, and read the news of Michael Vanstone’s death.

The paper dropped out of her hand; and she suddenly pulled down her veil. I caught one glance at her face before she hid it from me. The effect on my mind was startling in the extreme. To put it with my customary dash of humour—her face informed me that the most sensible action which Michael Vanstone, Esq., formerly of Zurich, had ever achieved in his life, was the action he performed at Brighton, on the 29th instant.

Finding the dead silence in the room singularly unpleasant under existing circumstances, I thought I would make a remark. My regard for my own interests supplied me with a subject. I mentioned the Entertainment.

‘After what has happened,’ I said, ‘I presume we go on with our performances as usual?’

‘No,’ she answered, behind the veil. ‘We go on with my inquiries.’

‘Inquiries after a dead man?’

‘Inquiries after the dead man’s son.’

‘Mr. Noel Vanstone?’

‘Yes; Mr. Noel Vanstone.’

Not having a veil to let down over my own face, I stooped and picked up the newspaper. Her devilish determination quite upset me for the moment. I actually had to steady myself, before I could speak to her again.

‘Are the new inquiries as harmless as the old ones?’ I asked.

‘Quite as harmless.’

‘What am I expected to find out?’

‘I wish to know whether Mr. Noel Vanstone remains at Brighton after the funeral.’

‘And if not?’

‘If not, I shall want to know his new address, wherever it may be.’

‘Yes. And what next?’

‘I wish you to find out next, if all the father’s money goes to the son.’

I began to see her drift. The word money relieved me; I felt quite on my own ground again.

‘Anything more?’ I asked.

‘Only one thing more,’ she answered. ‘Make sure, if you please, whether Mrs. Lecount, the housekeeper, remains or not in Mr. Noel Vanstone’s service.’

Her voice altered a little, as she mentioned Mrs. Lecount’s name: she is evidently sharp enough to distrust the housekeeper already.

‘My expenses are to be paid as usual?’ I said.

‘As usual.’

‘When am I expected to leave for Brighton?’

‘As soon as you can.’

She rose, and left the room. After a momentary doubt, I decided on executing the new commission. The more private inquiries I conduct for my fair relative, the harder she will find it to get rid of hers truly, Horatio Wragge.

There is nothing to prevent my starting for Brighton tomorrow. So to-morrow, I go. If Mr. Noel Vanstone succeeds to his father’s property, he is the only human being possessed of pecuniary blessings, who fails to inspire me with a feeling of unmitigated envy.

IX. *Chronicle for June*

9th.—I returned yesterday with my information. Here it is, privately noted down for convenience of future reference:

Mr. Noel Vanstone has left Brighton; and has removed, for the purpose of transacting business in London, to one of his late father's empty houses in Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth. This singularly mean selection of a place of residence, on the part of a gendeman of fortune, looks as if Mr. N. V. and his money were not easily parted.

Mr. Noel Vanstone has stepped into his father's shoes under the following circumstances. Mr. Michael Vanstone appears to have died, curiously enough, as Mr. Andrew Vanstone died—intestate. With this difference, however, in the two cases, that the younger brother left an informal will, and the elder brother left no will at all. The hardest men have their weaknesses; and Mr. Michael Vanstone's weakness seems to have been an insurmountable horror of contemplating the event of his own death. His son, his housekeeper, and his lawyer, had all three tried over and over again, to get him to make a will; and had never shaken his obstinate resolution to put off performing the only business-duty he was ever known to neglect. Two doctors attended him in his last illness; warned him that he was too old a man to hope to get over it; and warned him in vain. He announced his own positive determination not to die. His last words in this world (as I succeeded in discovering from the nurse, who assisted Mrs. Lecount) were, 'I'm getting better every minute; send for the fly directly and take me out for a drive.' The same night, Death proved to be the more obstinate of the two; and left his son (and only child) to take the property in due course of law. Nobody doubts that the result would have been the same if a will had been made. The father and son had every confidence in each other; and were known to have always lived together on the most friendly terms.

Mrs. Lecount remains with Mr. Noel Vanstone, in the same housekeeping capacity which she filled with his father; and has accompanied him to the new residence in Vauxhall Walk. She is acknowledged on all hands to have been a sufferer by the turn events have taken. If Mr. Michael Vanstone had made his will, there is no doubt she would have received a handsome legacy. She is now left dependent on Mr. Noel Vanstone's sense of gratitude; and she is not at all likely, I should imagine, to let that sense fall asleep for want of a little timely jogging. Whether my fair relative's future intentions in this quarter, point towards Mischief or Money, is more than I can yet say. In either case, I venture to predict that she will find an awkward obstacle in Mrs. Lecount.

So much for my information to the present date. The manner in which it was received by Miss Vanstone showed the most ungrateful distrust of me. She confided nothing to my private ear, but the expression of her best thanks. A sharp girl—a devilish sharp girl. But there *is* such a thing as bowling a man out once too often; especially when the name of that man happens to be Wragge.

Not a word more about the Entertainment; not a word more about moving from our present quarters. Very good. My right hand lays my left hand a wager. Ten to one, on her opening communications with the son, as she opened them with the father. Ten to one, on her writing to Noel Vanstone before the month is out.

21st.—She has written by to-day's post. A long letter apparently—for she put two stamps on the envelope. (Private memorandum, addressed to myself. Wait for the answer.)

22nd, 23rd, 24th.—(Private memorandum continued. Wait for the answer.)

25th.—The answer has come. As an ex-military man, I have naturally employed stratagem to get at it. The success which rewards all genuine perseverance has rewarded me—and I have got at it accordingly.

The letter is written, not by Mr. Noel Vanstone, but by Mrs. Lecount. She takes the highest moral ground, in a tone of spiteful politeness. Mr. Noel Vanstone's delicate health and recent bereavement, prevent him from writing himself. Any more letters from Miss Vanstone will be returned unopened. Any personal application will produce an immediate appeal to the protection of the law. Mr. Noel Vanstone, having been expressly cautioned against Miss Magdalen Vanstone, by his late lamented father, has not yet forgotten his father's advice. Considers it a reflection cast on the memory of the best of men, to suppose that his course of action towards the Miss Vanstones, can be other than the course of action which his father pursued. This is what he has himself instructed Mrs. Lecount to say. She has endeavoured to express herself in the most conciliatory language she could select; she has tried to avoid giving unnecessary pain, by addressing Miss Vanstone (as a matter of courtesy) by the family name; and she trusts these concessions, which speak for themselves, will not be thrown away.—Such is the substance of the letter,—and so it ends.

I draw two conclusions from this little document. First—that it will lead to serious results. Secondly—that Mrs. Lecount, with all her politeness, is a dangerous woman to deal with. I wish I saw my way safe before me. I don't see it yet.

29th.—Miss Vanstone has abandoned my protection; and the whole lucrative future of the dramatic entertainment has abandoned me with her. I am swindled—I, the last man under Heaven who could possibly have expected to write in those disgraceful terms of himself—I Am Swindled!

Let me chronicle the events. They exhibit me, for the time being, in a sadly helpless point of view. But the nature of the man prevails: I must have the events down in black and white.

The announcement of her approaching departure was intimated to me yesterday. After another civil speech about the information I had procured at Brighton, she hinted that there was a necessity for pushing our inquiries a little further. I immediately offered to undertake them, as before. 'No,' she said; 'they are not in your way this time. They are inquiries relating to a woman; and I mean to make them myself!' Feeling privately convinced that this new resolution pointed straight at Mrs. Lecount, I tried a few innocent questions on the subject. She quietly declined to answer them. I asked next, when she proposed to leave. She would leave on the twenty-eighth. For what destination? London. For long? Probably not. By herself? No. With me? No. With whom then? With Mrs. Wragge, if I had no objection. Good Heavens! for what possible purpose? For the purpose of getting a respectable lodging, which she could hardly expect to accomplish unless she was accompanied by an elderly female friend. And was I, in the capacity of elderly male friend, to be left out of the business altogether? Impossible to say at present. Was I not even to forward any letters which might come for her at our present address? No: she would make the arrangement herself at the post-office; and she would ask me, at the same time, for an address, at which I could receive a letter from her, in case of necessity for future communication. Further inquiries, after this last answer, could lead to nothing but waste of time. I saved time by putting no more questions.

It was clear to me, that our present position towards each other was what our position had been, previously to the event of Michael Vanstone's death. I returned, as before, to my choice of alternatives. Which way did my private interests point? Towards trusting the chance of her wanting me again? Towards threatening her with the interference of her relatives and friends? Or towards making the information which I possessed a marketable commodity between the wealthy branch of the family and myself? The last of the three was the alternative I had chosen in the case of the father. I chose it once more in the case of the son.

The train started for London nearly four hours since, and took her away in it, accompanied by Mrs. Wragge.

My wife is too great a fool, poor soul, to be actively valuable in the present emergency; but she will be passively

useful in keeping up Miss Vanstone's connection with me—and, in consideration of that circumstance, I consent to brush my own trousers, shave my own chin, and submit to the other inconveniences of waiting on myself for a limited period. Any faint glimmerings of sense which Mrs. Wragge may have formerly possessed, appear to have now finally taken their leave of her. On receiving permission to go to London, she favoured us immediately with two inquiries. Might she do some shopping? and might she leave the cookery-book behind her? Miss Vanstone said, Yes, to one question; and I said, Yes, to the other—and from that moment, Mrs. Wragge has existed in a state of perpetual laughter. I am still hoarse with vainly-repeated applications of vocal stimulant; and I left her in the railway carriage, to my inexpressible disgust, with *both* shoes down at heel.

Under ordinary circumstances, these absurd particulars would not have dwelt on my memory. But, as matters actually stand, my unfortunate wife's imbecility may, in her present position, lead to consequences which we none of us foresee. She is nothing more or less than a grown-up child; and I can plainly detect that Miss Vanstone trusts her, as she would not have trusted a sharper woman, on that very account. I know children little and big, rather better than my fair relative does; and I say—beware of all forms of human innocence, when it happens to be your interest to keep a secret to yourself.

Let me return to business. Here I am, at two o'clock on a fine summer's afternoon, left entirely alone, to consider the safest means of approaching Mr. Noel Vanstone, on my own account. My private suspicions of his miserly character, produce no discouraging effect on me. I have extracted cheering pecuniary results in my time from people quite as fond of their money as he can be. The real difficulty to contend with is the obstacle of Mrs. Lecount. If I am not mistaken, this lady merits a little serious consideration on my part. I will close my chronicle for to-day, and give Mrs. Lecount her due.

Three o'clock.—I open these pages again, to record a discovery which has taken me entirely by surprise.

After completing the last entry, a circumstance revived in my memory, which I had noticed on escorting the ladies this morning, to the railway. I then remarked that Miss Vanstone had only taken one of her three boxes with her—and it now occurred to me that a private investigation of the luggage she had left behind, might possibly be attended with beneficial results. Having, at certain periods of my life, been in the habit of cultivating friendly terms with strange locks, I found no difficulty in establishing myself on a familiar footing with Miss Vanstone's boxes. One of the two presented nothing to interest me. The other—devoted to the preservation of the costumes, articles of toilette, and other properties used in the dramatic Entertainment—proved to be better worth examining: for it led me straight to the discovery of one of its owner's secrets.

I found all the dresses in the box complete—with one remarkable exception. That exception was the dress of the old north-country lady; the character which I have already mentioned as the best of all my pupil's disguises, and as modelled in voice and manner on her old governess, Miss Garth. The wig; the eyebrows; the bonnet and veil; the cloak, padded inside to disfigure her back and shoulders; the paints and cosmetics used to age her face and alter her complexion—were all gone. Nothing but the gown remained; a gaudily flowered silk, useful enough for dramatic purposes, but too extravagant in colour and pattern to bear inspection by daylight. The other parts of the dress are sufficiently quiet to pass muster; the bonnet and veil are only old-fashioned, and the cloak is of a sober grey colour. But one plain inference can be drawn from such a discovery as this. As certainly as I sit here, she is going to open the campaign against Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount, in a character which neither of those two persons can have any possible reason for suspecting at the outset—the character of Miss Garth.

What course am I to take under these circumstances? Having got her secret, what am I to do with it? These are awkward considerations; I am rather puzzled how to deal with them.

It is something more than the mere fact of her choosing to disguise herself to forward her own private ends, that

causes my present perplexity. Hundreds of girls take fancies for disguising themselves; and hundreds of instances of it are related year after year, in the public journals. But my ex-pupil is not to be confounded, for one moment, with the average adventuress of the newspapers. She is capable of going a long way beyond the limit of dressing herself like a man, and imitating a man's voice and manner. She has a natural gift for assuming characters, which I have never seen equalled by a woman; and she has performed in public until she has felt her own power, and trained her talent for disguising herself to the highest pitch. A girl who takes the sharpest people unawares by using such a capacity as this to help her own objects in private life; and who sharpens that capacity by a determination to fight her way to her own purpose which has beaten down everything before it, up to this time—is a girl who tries an experiment in deception, new enough and dangerous enough to lead, one way or the other, to very serious results. This is my conviction, founded on a large experience in the art of imposing on my fellow-creatures. I say of my fair relative's enterprise what I never said or thought of it till I introduced myself to the inside of her box. The chances for and against her winning the fight for her lost fortune are now so evenly balanced, that I cannot for the life of me see on which side the scale inclines. All I can discern is, that it will, to a dead certainty, turn one way or the other, on the day when she passes Noel Vanstone's doors in disguise.

Which way do my interests point now? Upon my honour, I don't know.

Five o'clock.—I have effected a masterly compromise; I have decided on turning myself into a Jack-on-both-sides.

By to-day's post I have despatched to London an anonymous letter for Mr. Noel Vanstone. It will be forwarded to its destination by the same means which I successfully adopted to mystify Mr. Pendril; and it will reach Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth, by the afternoon of to-morrow at the latest.

The letter is short, and to the purpose. It warns Mr. Noel Vanstone, in the most alarming language, that he is destined to become the victim of a conspiracy; and that the prime mover of it is a young lady who has already held written communication with his father and himself. It offers him the information necessary to secure his own safety, on condition that he makes it worth the writer's while to run the serious personal risk which such a disclosure will entail on him. And it ends by stipulating that the answer shall be advertised in the Times; shall be addressed to 'An Unknown Friend;' and shall state plainly what remuneration Mr. Noel Vanstone offers for the priceless service which it is proposed to render him.

Unless some unexpected complication occurs, this letter places me exactly in the position which it is my present interest to occupy. If the advertisement appears, and if the remuneration offered is large enough to justify me in going over to the camp of the enemy, over I go. If no advertisement appears, or if Mr Noel Vanstone rates my invaluable assistance at too low a figure, here I remain, biding my time till my fair relative wants me—or till I make her want me, which comes to the same thing. If the anonymous letter falls by any accident into her hands, she will find disparaging allusions in it to myself, purposely introduced to suggest that the writer must be one of the persons whom I addressed, while conducting her inquiries. If Mrs. Lecount takes the business in hand, and lays a trap for me—I decline her tempting invitation, by becoming totally ignorant of the whole affair the instant any second person appears in it. Let the end come as it may, here I am ready to profit by it: here I am, facing both ways, with perfect ease and security—a moral agriculturist, with his eye on two crops at once, and his swindler's sickle ready for any emergency.

For the next week to come, the newspaper will be more interesting to me than ever. I wonder which side I shall eventually belong to?

The Third Scene

Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth

Wilkie Collins

Chapter I

The old Archiépiscopal Palace of Lambeth, on the southern bank of the Thames—with its Bishop's Walk and Garden, and its terrace fronting the river—is an architectural relic of the London of former times, precious to all lovers of the picturesque, in the utilitarian London of the present day. Southward of this venerable structure lies the street labyrinth of Lambeth; and nearly mid-way in that part of the maze of houses which is placed nearest to the river, runs the dingy double row of buildings, now, as in former days, known by the name of Vauxhall Walk.

The network of dismal streets stretching over the surrounding neighbourhood contains a population for the most part of the poorer order. In the thoroughfares where shops abound, the sordid struggle with poverty shows itself unreservedly on the filthy pavement; gathers its forces through the week; and, strengthening to a tumult on Saturday night, sees the Sunday morning dawn in murky gaslight. Miserable women, whose faces never smile, haunt the butchers' shops in such London localities as these, with relics of the men's wages saved from the public-house, clutched fast in their hands, with eyes that devour the meat they dare not buy, with eager fingers that touch it covetously, as the fingers of their richer sisters touch a precious stone. In this district, as in other districts remote from the wealthy quarters of the metropolis, the hideous London vagabond—with the filth of the street outmatched in his speech, with the mud of the street outdirtied in his clothes—lounges, lowering and brutal, at the street corner and the gin-shop door; the public disgrace of his country, the unheeded warning of social troubles that are yet to come. Here, the loud self-assertion of Modem Progress—which has reformed so much in manners, and altered so litde in men—meets the flat contradiction that scatters its pretensions to the winds. Here, while the national prosperity feasts, like another Belshazzar, on the spectacle of its own magnificence, is the Writing on the Wall,* which warns the monarch, Money, that his glory is weighed in the balance, and his power found wanting.

Situated in such a neighbourhood as this, Vauxhall Walk gains by comparison, and establishes claims to respectability which no impartial observation can fail to recognize. A large proportion of the Walk is still composed of private houses. In the scattered situations where shops appear, those shops are not besieged by the crowds of more populous thoroughfares. Commerce is not turbulent, nor is the public consumer besieged by loud invitations to 'buy.' Bird-fanciers have sought the congenial tranquillity of the scene; and pigeons coo, and canaries twitter, in Vauxhall Walk. Second-hand carts and cabs, bedsteads of a certain age, detached carriage wheels for those who may want one to make up a set, are all to be found here in the same repository. One tributary stream in the great flood of gas which illuminates London, tracks its parent source to Works

established in this locality. Here, the followers of John Wesley have set up a temple, built before the period of Methodist conversion to the principles of architectural religion. And here—most striking object of all—on the site where thousands of lights once sparkled; where sweet sounds of music made night tuneful till morning dawned; where the beauty and fashion of London feasted and danced through the summer seasons of a century—spreads, at this day, an awful wilderness of mud and rubbish; the deserted dead body of Vauxhall Gardens* mouldering in the open air.

On the same day when Captain Wragge completed the last entry in his Chronicle of Events, a woman appeared at the window of one of the houses in Vauxhall Walk, and removed from the glass a printed paper which had been wafered to it, announcing that Apartments were to be let. The apartments consisted of two rooms on the first floor. They had just been taken for a week certain, by two ladies who had paid in advance—those two ladies being Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge.

As soon as the mistress of the house had left the room, Magdalen walked to the window, and cautiously looked out from it at the row of buildings opposite. They were of superior pretensions in size and appearance to the other houses in the Walk: the date at which they had been erected was inscribed on one of them, and was stated to be the year 1759. They stood back from the pavement, separated from it by little strips of garden-ground. This peculiarity of position, added to the breadth of the roadway interposing between them and the smaller houses opposite, made it impossible for Magdalen to see the numbers on the doors, or to observe more of any one who might come to the windows than the bare general outline of dress and figure. Nevertheless, there she stood, anxiously fixing her eyes on one house in the row, nearly opposite to her—the house she had looked for before entering the lodgings; the house inhabited at that moment by Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount.

After keeping watch at the window, in silence, for ten minutes or more, she suddenly looked back into the room, to observe the effect which her behaviour might have produced on her travelling companion.

Not the slightest cause appeared for any apprehension in that quarter. Mrs. Wragge was seated at the table, absorbed in the arrangement of a series of smart circulars and tempting price-lists, issued by advertising tradespeople, and flung in at the cab-windows as they left the London terminus. T've often heard tell of light reading,' said Mrs. Wragge, resdessly shifting the positions of the circulars, as a child resdessly shifts the position of a new set of toys. 'Here's light reading, printed in pretty colours. Here's all the Things I'm going to buy when I'm out shopping to-morrow. Lend us a pencil, please—you won't be angry, will you?—I do so want to mark 'em off' She looked up at Magdalen, chuckled joyfully over her own altered circumstances, and beat her great hands on the table in irrepressible delight. 'No cookery-book!' cried Mrs. Wragge. 'No Buzzing in my head! no captain to shave to-morrow! I'm all down at heel; my cap's on one side; and nobody bawls at me. My heart alive, here *is* a holiday and no mistake!' Her hands began to drum on the table louder than ever, until Magdalen quieted them by presenting her with a pencil. Mrs. Wragge instantly recovered her dignity, squared her elbows on the table, and plunged into imaginary shopping for the rest of the evening.

Magdalen returned to the window. She took a chair, seated herself behind the curtain, and steadily fixed her eyes once more on the house opposite.

The blinds were down over the windows of the first floor and the second. The window of the room on the ground floor was uncovered and partly open, but no living creature came near it. Doors opened and people came and went, in the houses on either side; children by the dozen poured out on the pavement to play, and invaded the litde strips of garden-ground to recover lost balls and shutdecocks; streams of people passed backwards and forwards perpetually; heavy waggons piled high with goods, lumbered along the road on their way to, or their way from, the railway station near; all the daily life of the district stirred with its ceaseless activity in every direction but one. The hours passed—and there was the house opposite, still shut up, still void of any signs of

human existence, inside or out. The one object which had decided Magdalen on personally venturing herself in Vauxhall Walk—the object of studying the looks, manners, and habits of Mrs. Lecount and her master from a post of observation known only to herself—was, thus far, utterly defeated. After three hours' watching at the window, she had not even discovered enough to show her that the house was inhabited at all.

Shortly after six o'clock, the landlady disturbed Mrs. Wragge's studies by spreading the cloth for dinner. Magdalen placed herself at the table in a position which still enabled her to command the view from the window. Nothing happened. The dinner came to an end; Mrs. Wragge (lulled by the narcotic influences of annotating circulars and eating and drinking with an appetite sharpened by the captain's absence) withdrew to an arm-chair, and fell asleep in an attitude which would have caused her husband the acutest mental suffering; seven o'clock struck; the shadows of the summer evening lengthened stealthily on the grey pavement and the brown housewalls—and still the closed door opposite remained shut; still the one window open, showed nothing but the black blank of the room inside, lifeless and changeless as if that room had been a tomb.

Mrs. Wragge's meek snoring deepened in tone; the evening wore on drearily; it was close on eight o'clock—when an event happened at last. The street-door opposite opened for the first time, and a woman appeared on the threshold.

Was the woman Mrs. Lecount? No. As she came nearer, her dress showed her to be a servant. She had a large door-key in her hand, and was evidently going out to perform an errand. Roused, partly by curiosity—partly by the impulse of the moment, which urged her impetuous nature into action, after the passive endurance of many hours past—Magdalen snatched up her bonnet, and determined to follow the servant to her destination, wherever it might be.

The woman led her to the great thoroughfare of shops close at hand, called Lambeth Walk. After proceeding some little distance, and looking about her with the hesitation of a person not well acquainted with the neighbourhood, the servant crossed the road, and entered a stationer's shop. Magdalen crossed the road after her, and followed her in.

The inevitable delay in entering the shop under these circumstances, made Magdalen too late to hear what the woman asked for. The first words spoken, however, by the man behind the counter, reached her ears, and informed her that the servant's object was to buy a railway guide.

'Do you mean a Guide for this month? or a Guide for July?' asked the shopman, addressing his customer.

'Master didn't tell me which,' answered the woman. 'All I know is, he's going into the country the day after tomorrow.'

'The day after to-morrow is the first of July,' said the shopman. 'The Guide your master wants, is the Guide for the new month. It won't be published till to-morrow.'

Engaging to call again on the next day, the servant left the shop, and took the way that led back to Vauxhall Walk.

Magdalen purchased the first trifle she saw on the counter, and hastily returned in the same direction. The discovery she had just made was of very serious importance to her; and she felt the necessity of acting on it with as little delay as possible.

On entering the front room at the lodgings, she found Mrs. Wragge just awake, lost in drowsy bewilderment, with her cap fallen off on her shoulders, and with one of her shoes missing altogether. Magdalen endeavoured to

persuade her that she was tired after her journey, and that her wisest proceeding would be to go to bed. Mrs. Wragge was perfectly willing to profit by this suggestion, provided she could find her shoe first. In looking for the shoe, she unfortunately discovered the circulars, put by on a side table; and forthwith recovered her recollection of the earlier proceedings of the evening.

'Give us the pencil,' said Mrs. Wragge, shuffling the circulars in a violent hurry. 'I can't go to bed yet—I haven't half done marking down the things I want. Let's see; where did I leave off? *Try Finch's feeding-bottle for Infants*. No! there's a cross against that: the cross means I don't want it. *Comfort in the Field. Buckler's Indestructible Hunting Breeches*. Oh, dear, dear! I've lost the place. No, I haven't. Here it is; here's my mark against it. *Elegant Cashmere Robes; strictly oriental, very grand; reduced to one pound, nineteen, and sixpence. Be in time. Only three left*. Only three! Oh, do lend us the money and let's go and get one!'

'Not to-night,' said Magdalen. 'Suppose you go to bed now, and finish the circulars to-morrow? I will put them by the bedside for you, and you can go on with them as soon as you wake, the first thing in the morning.'

This suggestion met with Mrs. Wragge's immediate approval. Magdalen took her into the next room and put her to bed like a child—with her toys by her side. The room was so narrow, and the bed was so small; and Mrs. Wragge, arrayed in the white apparel proper for the occasion, with her moon face framed round by a spacious halo of nightcap—looked so hugely and disproportionately large, that Magdalen, anxious as she was, could not repress a smile on taking leave of her travelling companion for the night.

'Aha!' cried Mrs. Wragge, cheerfully; 'we'll have that Cashmere Robe to-morrow. Come here! I want to whisper something to you. Just you look at me—I'm going to sleep crooked, and the captain's not here to bawl at me!'

The front room at the lodgings contained a sofa bedstead, which the landlady arranged betimes for the night. This done, and the candles brought in, Magdalen was left alone to shape her future course, as her own thoughts counselled her.

The questions and answers which had passed in her presence that evening, at the stationer's shop, led plainly to the conclusion that one day more would bring Noel Vanstone's present term of residence in Vauxhall Walk to an end. Her first cautions resolution to pass many days together in unsuspected observation of the house opposite, before she ventured herself inside, was entirely frustrated by the turn events had taken. She was placed in the dilemma of running all risks headlong on the next day—or of pausing for a future opportunity, which might never occur. There was no middle course open to her. Until she had seen Noel Vanstone with her own eyes, and had discovered the worst there was to fear from Mrs. Lecount—until she had achieved this double object, with the needful precaution of keeping her own identity carefully in the dark—not a step could she advance towards the accomplishment of the purpose which had brought her to London.

One after another, the minutes of the night passed away; one after another, the thronging thoughts followed each other over her mind—and still she reached no conclusion; still she faltered and doubted, with a hesitation new to her in her experience of herself. At last she crossed the room impatiently to seek the trivial relief of unlocking her trunk, and taking from it the few things that she wanted for the night. Captain Wragge's suspicions had not misled him. There, hidden between two dresses, were the articles of costume which he had missed from her box at Birmingham. She turned them over one by one, to satisfy herself that nothing she wanted had been forgotten, and returned once more to her post of observation by the window.

The house opposite was dark down to the parlour. There, the blind, previously raised, was now drawn over the window: the light burning behind it, showed her for the first time that the room was inhabited. Her eyes

brightened, and her colour rose as she looked at it.

‘There he is!’ she said to herself, in a low angry whisper. ‘There he lives on our money, in the house that his father’s warning has closed against me!’ She dropped the blind which she had raised to look out; returned to her trunk; and took from it the grey wig which was part of her dramatic costume, in the character of the north-country lady. The wig had been crumpled in packing; she put it on, and went to the toilette table to comb it out. ‘His father has warned him against Magdalen Vanstone,’ she said, repeating the passage in Mrs. Lecount’s letter, and laughing bitterly, as she looked at herself in the glass. ‘I wonder whether his father has warned him against Miss Garth? To-morrow is sooner than I bargained for. No matter: to-morrow shall show.’

Chapter II

The early morning, when Magdalen rose and looked out, was cloudy and overcast. But as time advanced to the breakfast hour, the threatening of rain passed away; and she was free to provide, without hindrance from the weather, for the first necessity of the day—the necessity of securing the absence of her travelling companion from the house.

Mrs. Wragge was dressed, armed at all points with her collection of circulars, and eager to be away by ten o’clock. At an earlier hour Magdalen had provided for her being properly taken care of by the landlady’s eldest daughter,—a quiet, well-conducted girl, whose interest in the shopping expedition was readily secured by a little present of money for the purchase, on her own account, of a parasol and a muslin dress. Shortly after ten o’clock, Magdalen dismissed Mrs. Wragge and her attendant in a cab. She then joined the landlady—who was occupied in setting the rooms in order upstairs—with the object of ascertaining by a little well-timed gossip, what the daily habits might be of the inmates of the house.

She discovered that there were no other lodgers but Mrs. Wragge and herself. The landlady’s husband was away all day, employed at a railway station. Her second daughter was charged with the care of the kitchen, in the elder sister’s absence. The younger children were at school, and would be back at one o’clock to dinner. The landlady herself ‘got up fine linen for ladies,’ and expected to be occupied over her work all that morning, in a little room built out at the back of the premises. Thus, there was every facility for Magdalen’s leaving the house in disguise, and leaving it unobserved; provided she went out before the children came back to dinner at one o’clock.

By eleven o’clock the apartments were set in order, and the landlady had retired to pursue her own employments. Magdalen softly locked the door of her room; drew the blind over the window, and entered at once on her preparations for the perilous experiment of the day.

The same quick perception of dangers to be avoided, and difficulties to be overcome, which had warned her to leave the extravagant part of her character costume in the box at Birmingham, now kept her mind fully alive to the vast difference between a disguise worn by gaslight, for the amusement of an audience, and a disguise assumed by daylight to deceive the searching eyes of two strangers. The first article of dress which she put on was an old gown of her own (made of the material called ‘alpaca’),* of a dark-brown colour, with a neat pattern of little star-shaped spots in white. A double flounce running round the bottom of this dress was the only milliner’s ornament which it presented—an ornament not at all out of character with the costume appropriate to an elderly lady. The disguise of her head and face was the next object of her attention. She fitted and arranged the grey wig with the dexterity which constant practice had given her; fixed the false eyebrows (made rather

large, and of hair darker than the wig) carefully in their position, with the gum she had with her for the purpose, and stained her face, with the customary stage materials, so as to change the transparent fairness of her complexion to the dull, faintly opaque colour of a woman in ill-health. The lines and markings of age followed next; and here the first obstacles presented themselves. The art which succeeded by gaslight failed by day: the difficulty of hiding the plainly artificial nature of the marks was almost insuperable. She turned to her trunk; took from it two veils; and putting on her old-fashioned bonnet, tried the effect of them in succession. One of the veils (of black lace) was too thick to be worn over the face at that summer season, without exciting remark. The other, of plain net, allowed her features to be seen through it, just indistinctly enough to permit the safe introduction of certain lines (many fewer than she was accustomed to use in performing the character) on the forehead and at the sides of the mouth. But the obstacle thus set aside only opened the way to a new difficulty—the difficulty of keeping her veil down while she was speaking to other persons, without any obvious reason for doing so. An instant's consideration, and a chance look at her little china pallette of stage colours, suggested to her ready invention the production of a visible excuse for wearing her veil. She deliberately disfigured herself by artificially reddening the insides of her eyelids, so as to produce an appearance of inflammation which no human creature but a doctor—and that doctor at close quarters—could have detected as false. She sprang to her feet, and looked triumphantly at the hideous transformation of herself reflected in the glass. Who could think it strange now if she wore her veil down, and if she begged Mrs. Lecount's permission to sit with her back to the light?

Her last proceeding was to put on the quiet grey cloak, which she had brought from Birmingham, and which had been padded inside by Captain Wragge's own experienced hands, so as to hide the youthful grace and beauty of her back and shoulders. Her costume being now complete, she practised the walk which had been originally taught her as appropriate to the character—a walk with a slight limp—and, returning to the glass, after a minute's trial, exercised herself next in the disguise of her voice and manner. This was the only part of the character in which it had been possible, with her physical peculiarities, to produce an imitation of Miss Garth; and here the resemblance was perfect. The harsh voice, the blunt manner, the habit of accompanying certain phrases by an emphatic nod of the head, the Northumbrian *burr* expressing itself in every word which contained the letter V—all these personal peculiarities of the old north-country governess were reproduced to the life. The personal transformation thus completed, was literally what Captain Wragge had described it to be—a triumph in the art of self-disguise. Excepting the one case of seeing her face close, with a strong light on it, nobody who now looked at Magdalen could have suspected for an instant that she was other than an idling, ill-made, unattractive woman of fifty years old at least.

Before unlocking the door she looked about her carefully, to make sure that none of her stage materials were exposed to view, in case the landlady entered the room in her absence. The only forgotten object belonging to her that she discovered was a little packet of Norah's letters, which she had been reading overnight, and which had been accidentally pushed under the looking-glass while she was engaged in dressing herself. As she took up the letters to put them away, the thought struck her for the first time—'Would Norah know me now if we met each other in the street?' She looked in the glass, and smiled sadly. 'No,' she said, 'not even Norah.'

She unlocked the door, after first looking at her watch. It was close on twelve o'clock. There was barely an hour left to try her desperate experiment, and to return to the lodging before the landlady's children came back from school.

An instant's listening on the landing assured her that all was quiet in the passage below. She noiselessly descended the stairs, and gained the street without having met any living creature on her way out of the house. In another minute she had crossed the road, and had knocked at Noel Vanstone's door.

The door was opened by the same woman servant whom she had followed on the previous evening to the stationer's shop. With a momentary tremor, which recalled the memorable first night of her appearance in public, Magdalen inquired (in Miss Garth's voice, and with Miss Garth's manner), for Mrs. Lecount.

'Mrs. Lecount has gone out, ma'am,' said the servant.

'Is Mr. Vanstone at home?' asked Magdalen, her resolution asserting itself at once against the first obstacle that opposed it.

'My master is not up yet, ma'am.'

Another check! A weaker nature would have accepted the warning. Magdalen's nature rose in revolt against it.

'What time will Mrs. Lecount be back?' she asked.

'About one o'clock, ma'am.'

'Say, if you please, that I will call again, as soon after one o'clock as possible. I particularly wish to see Mrs. Lecount. My name is Miss Garth.'

She turned and left the house. Going back to her own room was out of the question. The servant (as Magdalen knew by not hearing the door close), was looking after her; and, moreover, she would expose herself, if she went indoors, to the risk of going out again exactly at the time when the landlady's children were sure to be about the house. She turned mechanically to the right; walked on until she reached Vauxhall Bridge; and waited there, looking out over the river.

The interval of unemployed time now before her was nearly an hour. How should she occupy it?

As she asked herself the question, the thought which had struck her when she put away the packet of Norah's letters, rose in her mind once more. A sudden impulse to test the miserable completeness of her disguise, mixed with the higher and purer feeling at her heart; and strengthened her natural longing to see her sister's face again, though she dare not discover herself and speak. Norah's later letters had described, in the fullest detail, her life as a governess—her hours for teaching, her hours of leisure, her hours for walking out with her pupils. There was just time, if she could find a vehicle at once, for Magdalen to drive to the house of Norah's employer, with the chance of getting there a few minutes before the hour when her sister would be going out. 'One look at her will tell me more than a hundred letters!' With that thought in her heart: with the one object of following Norah on her daily walk, under protection of the disguise, Magdalen hastened over the bridge, and made for the northern bank of the river.

So, at the turning point of her life—so, in the interval before she took the irrevocable step, and passed the threshold of Noel Vanstone's door—the forces of Good triumphing in the strife for her over the forces of Evil, turned her back on the scene of her meditated deception, and hurried her mercifully farther and farther away from the fatal house.

She stopped the first empty cab that passed her; told the driver to go to New Street, Spring Gardens; and promised to double his fare if he reached his destination by a given time. The man earned the money—more than earned it, as the event proved. Magdalen had not taken ten steps in advance along New Street, walking towards St. James's Park, before the door of a house beyond her opened, and a lady in mourning came out accompanied by two little girls. The lady also took the direction of the Park, without turning her head towards Magdalen, as she descended the house step. It mattered little; Magdalen's heart looked through her eyes, and told her that she saw Norah.

She followed them into St. James's Park, and thence (along the Mall) into the Green Park, venturing closer and closer as they reached the grass and ascended the rising ground in the direction of Hyde Park Corner. Her eager eyes devoured every detail in Norah's dress, and detected the slightest change that had taken place in her figure and her bearing. She had become thinner since the autumn—her head drooped a little; she walked wearily. Her mourning dress, worn with the modest grace and neatness which no misfortune could take from her, was suited to her altered station; her black gown was made of stuff; her black shawl and bonnet were of the plainest and cheapest kind. The two little girls, walking on either side of her, were dressed in silk. Magdalen instinctively hated them.

She made a wide circuit on the grass, so as to turn gradually and meet her sister, without exciting suspicion that the meeting was contrived. Her heart beat fast; a burning heat glowed in her as she thought of her false hair, her false colour, her false dress, and saw the dear familiar face coming nearer and nearer. They passed each other close. Norah's dark gentle eyes looked up, with a deeper light in them, with a sadder beauty, than of old—rested all unconscious of the truth on her sister's face—and looked away from it again, as from the face of a stranger. That glance of an instant struck Magdalen to the heart. She stood rooted to the ground, after Norah had passed by. A horror of the vile disguise that concealed her; a yearning to burst its trammels and hide her shameful painted face on Norah's bosom, took possession of her, body and soul. She turned and looked back.

Norah and the two children had reached the higher ground, and were close to one of the gates in the iron railing which fenced the Park from the street. Drawn by an irresistible fascination, Magdalen followed them again, gained on them as they reached the gate, and heard the voices of the two children raised in angry dispute which way they wanted to walk next. She saw Norah take them through the gate, and then stoop and speak to them, while waiting for an opportunity to cross the road. They only grew the louder and the angrier for what she said. The youngest—a girl of eight or nine years old—flew into a child's vehement passion, cried, screamed, and even kicked at the governess. The people in the street stopped and laughed; some of them jestingly advised a little wholesome correction; one woman asked Norah if she was the child's mother; another pitied her audibly for being the child's governess. Before Magdalen could push her way through the crowd—before her all-mastering anxiety to help her sister had blinded her to every other consideration, and had brought her, self-betrayed, to Norah's side—an open carriage passed the pavement slowly, hindered in its progress by the press of vehicles before it. An old lady seated inside heard the child's cries, recognized Norah, and called to her immediately. The footman parted the crowd, and the children were put into the carriage. 'It's lucky I happened to pass this way,' said the old lady, beckoning contemptuously to Norah to take her place on the front seat; 'you never could manage my daughter's children, and you never will.' The footman put up the steps—the carriage drove on with the children and the governess—the crowd dispersed—and Magdalen was alone again.

'So be it!' she thought bitterly. 'I should only have distressed her. We should only have had the misery of parting to suffer again.'

She mechanically retraced her steps; she returned, as in a dream, to the open space of the Park. Arming itself treacherously with the strength of her love for her sister, with the vehemence of the indignation that she felt for her sister's sake, the terrible temptation of her life fastened its hold on her more firmly than ever. Through all the paint and disfigurement of the disguise, the fierce despair of that strong and passionate nature lowered haggard and horrible. Norah made an object of public curiosity and amusement; Norah reprimanded in the open street; Norah the hired victim of an old woman's insolence, and a child's ill-temper—and the same man to thank for it who had sent Frank to China!—and that man's son to thank after him! The thought of her sister, which had turned her from the scene of her meditated deception, which had made the consciousness of her own disguise hateful to her—was now the thought which sanctioned that means, or any means, to compass her end; the thought which set wings to her feet, and hurried her back nearer and nearer to the fatal house.

She left the Park again; and found herself in the streets without knowing where. Once more she hailed the first cab that passed her—and told the man to drive to Vauxhall Walk.

The change from walking to riding quieted her. She felt her attention returning to herself and her dress. The necessity of making sure that no accident had happened to her disguise, in the interval since she had left her own room, impressed itself immediately on her mind. She stopped the driver at the first pastrycook's shop which he passed, and there obtained the means of consulting a looking-glass before she ventured back to Vauxhall Walk.

Her grey head-dress was disordered, and the old-fashioned bonnet was a little on one side. Nothing else had suffered. She set right the few defects in her costume, and returned to the cab. It was half-past one, when she approached the house, and knocked, for the second time, at Noel Vanstone's door. The woman-servant opened it, as before.

'Has Mrs. Lecount come back?'

'Yes, ma'am. Step this way, if you please.'

The servant preceded Magdalen along an empty passage; and, leading her past an uncarpeted staircase, opened the door of a room at the back of the house. The room was lighted by one window looking out on a yard; the walls were bare; the boarded floor was uncovered. Two bedroom chairs stood against the wall, and a kitchen-table was placed under the window. On the table stood a glass tank filled with water; and ornamented in the middle by a miniature pyramid of rock-work interlaced with weeds. Snails clung to the sides of the tank; tadpoles and tiny fish swam swiftly in the green water; slippery efts and slimy frogs twined their noiseless way in and out of the weedy rock-work—and, on top of the pyramid, there sat solitary, cold as the stone, brown as the stone, motionless as the stone, a little brighteyed toad. The art of keeping fish and reptiles as domestic pets had not at that time been popularized in England; and Magdalen, on entering the room, started back, in irrepressible astonishment and disgust, from the first specimen of an Aquarium that she had ever seen.

'Don't be alarmed,' said a woman's voice behind her. 'My pets hurt nobody.'

Magdalen turned, and confronted Mrs. Lecount. She had expected—founding her anticipations on the letter which the housekeeper had written to her—to see a hard, wily, ill-favoured, insolent old woman. She found herself in the presence of a lady of mild ingratiating manners; whose dress was the perfection of neatness, taste, and matronly simplicity; whose personal appearance was little less than a triumph of physical resistance to the deteriorating influence of time. If Mrs. Lecount had struck some fifteen or sixteen years off her real age, and had asserted herself to be eight-and-thirty, there would not have been one man in a thousand, or one woman in a hundred, who would have hesitated to believe her. Her dark hair was just turning to grey, and no more. It was plainly parted under a spotless lace cap, sparingly ornamented with mourning ribbons. Not a wrinkle appeared on her smooth white forehead, or her plump white cheeks. Her double chin was dimpled, and her teeth were marvels of whiteness and regularity. Her lips might have been critically considered as too thin, if they had not been accustomed to make the best of their defects by means of a pleading and persuasive smile. Her large black eyes might have looked fierce if they had been set in the face of another woman: they were mild and melting in the face of Mrs. Lecount; they were tenderly interested in everything she looked at—in Magdalen, in the toad on the rockwork, in the back-yard view from the window; in her own plump fair hands, which she rubbed softly one over the other while she spoke; in her own pretty cambric chemisette,* which she had a habit of looking at complacently while she listened to others. The elegant black gown in which she mourned the memory of Michael Vanstone was not a mere dress—it was a well-made compliment paid to Death. Her innocent white muslin apron was a little domestic poem in itself. Her jet earrings were so modest in their pretensions, that a Quaker might have looked at them, and committed no sin.. The comely plumpness of her face was matched by

the comely plumpness of her figure: it glided smoothly over the ground; it flowed in sedate undulations when she walked. There are not many men who could have observed Mrs. Lecount entirely from the Platonic point of view—lads in their teens would have found her irresistible—women only could have hardened their hearts against her, and mercilessly forced their way inwards through that fair and smiling surface. Magdalen's first glance at this Venus of the autumn period of female life, more than satisfied her that she had done well to feel her ground in disguise, before she ventured on matching herself against Mrs. Lecount.

'Have I the pleasure of addressing the lady who called this morning?' inquired the housekeeper. 'Am I speaking to Miss Garth?'

Something in the expression of her eyes, as she asked that question, warned Magdalen to turn her face farther inwards from the window than she had turned it yet. 'The bare doubt whether the housekeeper might not have seen her already under too strong a light, shook her self-possession for the moment. She gave herself time to recover it, and merely answered by a bow.

'Accept my excuses, ma'am, for the place in which I am compelled to receive you,' proceeded Mrs. Lecount, in fluent English, spoken with a foreign accent. 'Mr. Vanstone is only here for a temporary purpose. We leave for the sea-side to-morrow afternoon; and it has not been thought worth while to set the house in proper order. Will you take a seat, and oblige me by mentioning the object of your visit?'

She glided imperceptibly a step or two nearer to Magdalen, and placed a chair for her exactly opposite the light from the window. 'Pray sit down,' said Mrs. Lecount, looking with the tenderest interest at the visitor's inflamed eyes, through the visitor's net veil.

'I am suffering, as you see, from a complaint in the eyes,' replied Magdalen, steadily keeping her profile towards the window, and carefully pitching her voice to the tone of Miss Garth's. 'I must beg your permission to wear my veil down and to sit away from the light.' She said those words, feeling mistress of herself again. With perfect composure she drew the chair back into the corner of the room beyond the window; and seated herself, keeping the shadow of her bonnet well over her face. Mrs. Lecount's persuasive lips murmured a polite expression of sympathy; Mrs. Lecount's amiable black eyes looked more interested in the strange lady than ever. She placed a chair for herself exactly on a line with Magdalen's, and sat so close to the wall as to force her visitor either to turn her head a little further round towards the window, or to fail in politeness by not looking at the person whom she addressed. 'Yes,' said Mrs. Lecount, with a confidential litde cough. 'And to what circumstances am I indebted for the honour of this visit?'

'May I inquire, first, if my name happens to be familiar to you?' said Magdalen, turning towards her as a matter of necessity—but coolly holding up her handkerchief, at the same time, between her face and the light.

'No,' answered Mrs. Lecount, with another litde cough, rather harsher than the first. 'The name of Miss Garth is not familiar to me.'

'In that case,' pursued Magdalen, 'I shall best explain the object that causes me to intrude on you, by mentioning who I am. I lived for many years, as governess, in the family of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone, of Combe-Raven; and I come here in the interest of his orphan daughters.'

Mrs. Lecount's hands, which had been smoothly sliding one over the other, up to this time, suddenly stopped; and Mrs. Lecount's lips self-forgetfully shutting up, owned they were too thin at the very outset of the interview.

'I am surprised you can bear the light out of doors, without a green shade,' she quietly remarked; leaving the

false Miss Garth's announcement of herself as completely unnoticed as if she had not spoken at all.

'I find a shade over my eyes keeps them too hot at this time of the year,' rejoined Magdalen, steadily matching the housekeeper's composure. 'May I ask whether you heard what I said just now on the subject of my errand in this house?'

'May I inquire, on my side, ma'am, in what way that errand can possibly concern *me*? retorted Mrs. Lecount.

'Certainly,' said Magdalen. 'I come to you because Mr. Noel Vanstone's intendons towards the two young ladies, were made known to them in the form of a letter from yourself.'

That plain answer had its effect. It warned Mrs. Lecount that the strange lady was better informed than she had at first suspected, and that it might hardly be wise, under the circumstances, to dismiss her unheard.

'Pray pardon me,' said the housekeeper, 'I scarcely understood before; I perfectly understand now. You are mistaken, ma'am, in supposing that I am of any importance, or that I exercise any influence in this painful matter. I am the mouthpiece of Mr. Noel Vanstone; the pen he holds, if you will excuse the expression—nothing more. He is an invalid; and like other invalids, he has his bad days and his good. It was his bad day, when that answer was written to the young person———, shall I call her Miss Vanstone? I will, with pleasure, poor girl; for who am I to make distinctions, and what is it to me whether her parents were married or not? As I was saying, it was one of Mr. Noel Vanstone's bad days, when that answer was sent, and therefore I had to write it; simply as his secretary, for want of a better. If you wish to speak on the subject of these young ladies ———,shall I call them young ladies, as you did just now? no, poor things, I will call them the Miss Vanstones. —If you wish to speak on the subject of these Miss Vanstones, I will mention your name, and your object in favouring me with this call, to Mr. Noel Vanstone. He is alone in the parlour, and this is one of his good days. I have the influence of an old servant over him; and I will use that influence with pleasure in your behalf. Shall I go at once?' asked Mrs. Lecount, rising with the friendliest anxiety to make herself useful.

'If you please,' replied Magdalen; 'and if I am not taking any undue advantage of your kindness.'

'On the contrary,' rejoined Mrs. Lecount, 'you are laying me under an obligation—you are permitting me, in my very limited way, to assist the performance of a benevolent action.' She bowed, smiled, and glided out of the room.

Left by herself, Magdalen allowed the anger which she had suppressed in Mrs. Lecount's presence to break free from her. For want of a nobler object of attack, it took the direction of the toad. The sight of the hideous little reptile sitting placid on his rock throne, with his bright eyes staring impenetrably into vacancy, irritated every nerve in her body. She looked at the creature with a shrinking intensity of hatred; she whispered at it maliciously through her set teeth. 'I wonder whose blood runs coldest,' she said, 'yours, you little monster, or Mrs. Lecount's? I wonder which is the slimiest, her heart or your back? You hateful wretch, do you know what your mistress is? Your mistress is a devil!'

The speckled skin under the toad's mouth mysteriously wrinkled itself, then slowly expanded again, as if he had swallowed the words just addressed to him. Magdalen started back in disgust from the first perceptible movement in the creature's body, trifling as it was, and returned to her chair. She had not seated herself again a moment too soon. The door opened noiselessly, and Mrs. Lecount appeared once more.

'Mr. Vanstone will see you,' she said, 'if you will kindly wait a few minutes. He will ring the parlour bell when his present occupation is at an end, and he is ready to receive you. Be careful, ma'am, not to depress his spirits, or to agitate him in any way. His heart has been a cause of serious anxiety to those about him, from his earliest

years. There is no positive disease; there is only a chronic feebleness—a fatty degeneration—a want of vital power in the organ itself. His heart will go on well enough if you don't give his heart too much to do—that is the advice of all the medical men who have seen him. You will not forget it, and you will keep a guard over your conversation accordingly. Talking of medical men, have you ever tried the Golden Ointment for that sad affliction in your eyes? It has been described to me as an excellent remedy.'

'It has not succeeded in my case,' replied Magdalen, sharply. 'Before I see Mr. Noel Vanstone,' she continued, 'may I inquire———'

'I beg your pardon,' interposed Mrs. Lecount. 'Does your question refer in any way to those two poor girls?'

'It refers to the Miss Vanstones.'

'Then I can't enter into it. Excuse me, I really can't discuss these poor girls (I am so glad to hear you call them the Miss Vanstones!) except in my master's presence, and by my master's express permission. Let us talk of something else while we are waiting here. Will you notice my glass Tank? I have every reason to believe that it is a perfect novelty in England.'

'I looked at the Tank while you were out of the room,' said Magdalen.

'Did you? You take no interest in the subject, I dare say? Quite natural. I took no interest either until I was married. My dear husband—dead many years since—formed my tastes, and elevated me to himself. You have heard of the late Professor Lecomte, the eminent Swiss naturalist? I am his widow. The English circle at Zurich (where I lived in my late master's service) Anglicised my name to Lecount. Your generous country people will have nothing foreign about them—not even a name, if they can help it. But I was speaking of my husband—my dear husband, who permitted me to assist him in his pursuits. I have had only one interest since his death—an interest in science. Eminent in many things, the Professor was great at reptiles. He left me his Subjects and his Tank. I had no other legacy. There is the Tank. All the Subjects died but this quiet little fellow—this nice little toad. Are you surprised at my liking him? There is nothing to be surprised at. The Professor lived long enough to elevate me above the common prejudice against the reptile creation. Properly understood, the reptile creation is beautiful. Properly dissected, the reptile creation is instructive in the last degree.' She stretched out her little finger, and gently stroked the toad's back with the tip of it. 'So refreshing to the touch,' said Mrs. Lecount. 'So nice and cool this summer weather!'

The bell from the parlour rang. Mrs. Lecount rose, bent fondly over the Aquarium, and chirruped to the toad at parting as if it had been a bird. 'Mr. Vanstone is ready to receive you. Follow me, if you please, Miss Garth.' With these words she opened the door, and led the way out of the room.

Chapter III

'Miss Garth, sir,' said Mrs. Lecount, opening the parlour door, and announcing the visitor's appearance, with the tone and manner of a well-bred servant.

Magdalen found herself in a long, narrow room—consisting of a back parlour and a front parlour, which had been thrown into one by opening the folding-doors between them. Seated not far from the front window, with his back to the light, she saw a frail, flaxen-haired, self-satisfied littie man, clothed in a fair white dressing-gown, many sizes too large for him, with a nosegay of violets drawn neatly through the button-hole over his

breast. He looked from thirty to five-and-thirty years old. His complexion was as delicate as a young girl's, his eyes were of the tightest blue, his upper tip was adorned by a weak tittle white moustache, waxed and twisted at either end into a thin spiral curl. When any object specially attracted his attention, he half closed his eyelids to look at it. When he smiled, the skin at his temples crumpled itself up into a nest of wicked tittle wrinkles. He had a plate of strawberries on his lap, with a napkin under them to preserve the purity of his white dressing-gown. At his right hand stood a large round table, covered with a collection of foreign curiosities, which seemed to have been brought together from the four quarters of the globe. Stuffed birds from Africa, porcelain monsters from China, silver ornaments and utensils from India and Peru, mosaic work from Italy, and bronzes from France—were all heaped together, pell-mell, with the coarse deal boxes and dingy leather cases which served to pack them for travelling. The tittle man apologized, with a cheerful and simpering conceit, for his litter of curiosities, his dressing-gown, and his delicate health; and, waving his hand towards a chair, placed his attention, with pragmatical politeness, at the visitor's disposal. Magdalen looked at him with a momentary doubt whether Mrs. Lecount had not deceived her. Was this the man who mercilessly followed the path on which his merciless father had walked before him? She could hardly believe it. 'Take a seat, Miss Garth,' he repeated; observing her hesitation, and announcing his own name, in a high, thin, fretfully-consequential voice: 'I am Mr. Noel Vanstone. You wished to see me—here I am!'

'May I be permitted to retire, sir?' inquired Mrs. Lecount.

'Certainly not!' replied her master. 'Stay here, Lecount, and keep us company. Mrs. Lecount has my fullest confidence,' he continued, addressing Magdalen. 'Whatever you say to me, ma'am, you say to her. She is a domestic treasure. There is not another house in England has such a treasure as Mrs. Lecount.'

The housekeeper listened to the praise of her domestic virtues with eyes immovably fixed on her elegant chemisette. But Magdalen's quick penetration had previously detected a look that passed between Mrs. Lecount and her master, which suggested that Noel Vanstone had been instructed beforehand, what to say and do in his visitor's presence. The suspicion of this—and the obstacles which the room presented to arranging her position in it so as to keep her face from the light—warned Magdalen to be on her guard.

She had taken her chair at first nearly midway in the room. An instant's after-reflection induced her to move her seat towards the left hand, so as to place herself just inside, and close against, the left post of the folding-door. In this position, she dexterously barred the only passage by which Mrs. Lecount could have skirted round the large table, and contrived to front Magdalen by taking a chair at her master's side. On the right hand of the table the empty space was well occupied by the fireplace and fender, by some travelling trunks, and a large packing-case. There was no alternative left for Mrs. Lecount but to place herself on a line with Magdalen, against the opposite post of the folding-door—or to push rudely past the visitor, with the obvious intention of getting in front of her. With an expressive little cough, and with one steady look at her master, the housekeeper conceded the point, and took her seat against the right-hand door-post. 'Wait a little,' thought Mrs. Lecount, 'my turn next!'

'Mind what you are about, ma'am!' cried Noel Vanstone, as Magdalen accidentally approached the table, in moving her chair. 'Mind the sleeve of your cloak! Excuse me, you nearly knocked down that silver candlestick. Pray don't suppose it's a common candlestick. It's nothing of the sort—it's a Peruvian candlestick. There are only three of that pattern in the world. One is in the possession of the President of Peru; one is locked up in the Vatican; and one is on My table. It cost ten pounds; it's worth fifty. One of my father's bargains, ma'am. All these things are my father's bargains. There is not another house in England which has such curiosities as these. Sit down, Lecount; I beg you will make yourself comfortable. Mrs. Lecount is like the curiosities, Miss Garth—she is one of my father's bargains. You are one of my father's bargains, are you not, Lecount? My father was a

remarkable man, ma'am. You will be reminded of him here, at every turn. I have got his dressing-gown on at this moment. No such linen as this is made now—you can't get it for love or money. Would you like to feel the texture? Perhaps you're no judge of texture? Perhaps you would prefer talking to me about these two pupils of yours? They are two, are they not? Are they fine girls? Plump, fresh, full-blown English beauties?'

'Excuse me, sir,' interposed Mrs. Lecount sorrowfully. 'I must really beg permission to retire if you speak of the poor things in that way. I can't sit by, sir, and hear them turned into ridicule. Consider their position; consider Miss Garth.'

'You good creature!' said Noel Vanstone, surveying the housekeeper through his half-closed eyelids. 'You excellent Lecount! I assure you, ma'am, Mrs. Lecount is a worthy creature. You will observe that she pities the two girls. I don't go so far as that myself—but I can make allowances for them. I am a large-minded man. I can make allowances for them and for you.' He smiled with the most cordial politeness, and helped himself to a strawberry from the dish on his lap.

'You shock Miss Garth; indeed, sir, without meaning it, you shock Miss Garth,' remonstrated Mrs. Lecount. 'She is not accustomed to you as I am. Consider Miss Garth, sir. As a favour to *me*, consider Miss Garth.'

Thus far, Magdalen had resolutely kept silence. The burning anger which would have betrayed her in an instant if she had let it flash its way to the surface, throbbed fast and fiercely at her heart, and warned her, while Noel Vanstone was speaking, to close her lips. She would have allowed him to talk on uninterruptedly for some minutes more, if Mrs. Lecount had not interfered for the second time. The refined insolence of the housekeeper's pity, was a woman's insolence; and it stung her into instantly controlling herself. She had never more admirably imitated Miss Garth's voice and manner, than when she spoke her next words.

'You are very good,' she said to Mrs. Lecount. 'I make no claim to be treated with any extraordinary consideration. I am a governess, and I don't expect it. I have only one favour to ask. I beg Mr. Noel Vanstone, for his own sake, to hear what I have to say to him.'

'You understand, sir?' observed Mrs. Lecount. 'It appears that Miss Garth has some serious warning to give you. She says you are to hear her, for your own sake.'

Mr. Noel Vanstone's fair complexion suddenly turned white. He put away the plate of strawberries among his father's bargains. His hand shook, and his little figure twisted itself uneasily in the chair. Magdalen observed him attentively. 'One discovery already,' she thought; 'he is a coward!'

'What do you mean, ma'am?' asked Noel Vanstone with visible trepidation of look and manner. 'What do you mean by telling me I must listen to you for my own sake? If you come here to intimidate me, you come to the wrong man. My strength of character was universally noticed in our circle at Zurich—wasn't it, Lecount?'

'Universally, sir,' said Mrs. Lecount. 'But let us hear Miss Garth. Perhaps I have misinterpreted her meaning?'

'On the contrary,' replied Magdalen, 'you have exactly expressed my meaning. My object in coming here is to warn Mr. Noel Vanstone against the course which he is now taking.'

'Don't!' pleaded Mrs. Lecount. 'Oh, if you want to help these poor girls, don't talk in that way! Soften his resolution, ma'am, by entreaties; don't strengthen it by threats!' She a little overstrained the tone of humility in which she spoke those words—a little overacted the look of apprehension which accompanied them. If Magdalen had not seen plainly enough already that it was Mrs. Lecount's habitual practice to decide everything for her master in the first instance, and then to persuade him that he was not acting under his housekeeper's

resolution, but under his own—she would have seen it now.

‘You hear what Lecount has just said?’ remarked Noel Vanstone. ‘You hear the unsolicited testimony of a person who has known me from childhood? Take care, Miss Garth—take care!’ He complacently arranged the tails of his white dressing-gown over his knees, and took the plate of strawberries back on his lap.

‘I have no wish to offend you,’ said Magdalen. ‘I am only anxious to open your eyes to the truth. You are not acquainted with the characters of the two sisters whose fortunes have fallen into your possession. I have known them from childhood; and I come to give you the benefit of my experience in their interests and in yours. You have nothing to dread from the elder of the two; she patiently accepts the hard lot which you, and your father before you, have forced on her. The younger sister’s conduct is the very opposite of this. She has already declined to submit to your father’s decision; and she now refuses to be silenced by Mrs. Lecount’s letter. Take my word for it, she is capable of giving you serious trouble if you persist in making an enemy of her.’

Noel Vanstone changed colour once more, and began to fidget again in his chair. ‘Serious trouble,’ he repeated, with a blank look. ‘If you mean writing letters, ma’am, she has given trouble enough already. She has written once to me, and twice to my father. One of the letters to my father was a threatening letter—wasn’t it, Lecount?’

‘She expressed her feelings, poor child,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘I thought it hard to send her back her letter, but your dear father knew best. What I said at the time was, Why not let her express her feelings? What are a few threatening words, after all? In her position, poor creature, they are words, and nothing more.’

‘I advise you not to be too sure of that,’ said Magdalen. ‘I know her better than you do.’

She paused at those words—paused in a momentary terror. The sting of Mrs. Lecount’s pity had nearly irritated her into forgetting her assumed character, and speaking in her own voice.

‘You have referred to the letters written by my pupil,’ she resumed, addressing Noel Vanstone, as soon as she felt sure of herself again. ‘We will say nothing about what she has written to your father; we will only speak of what she has written to you. Is there anything unbecoming in her letter, anything said in it that is false? Is it not true that these two sisters have been cruelly deprived of the provision which their father made for them? His will to this day speaks for him and for them; and it only speaks to no purpose, because he was not aware that his marriage obliged him to make it again, and because he died before he could remedy the error. Can you deny that?’

Noel Vanstone smiled, and helped himself to a strawberry. ‘I don’t attempt to deny it,’ he said. ‘Go on, Miss Garth.’

‘Is it not true,’ persisted Magdalen, ‘that the law which has taken the money from these sisters, whose father made no second will, has now given that very money to you, whose father made no will at all? Surely, explain it how you may, this is hard on those orphan girls?’

‘Very hard,’ replied Noel Vanstone. ‘It strikes you in that fight, too—doesn’t it, Lecount?’

Mrs. Lecount shook her head, and closed her handsome black eyes. ‘Harrowing,’ she said; ‘I can characterize it, Miss Garth, by no other word—harrowing. How the young person—no! how Miss Vanstone the younger—discovered that my late respected master made no will, I am at a loss to understand. Perhaps it was put in the papers? But I am interrupting you, Miss Garth. You have something more to say about your pupil’s letter?’ She noiselessly drew her chair forward as she said those words, a few inches beyond the line of the visitor’s chair. The attempt was neatly made, but it proved useless. Magdalen only kept her head more to the left—and the

packing-case on the floor prevented Mrs. Lecount from advancing any farther.

‘I have only one more question to put,’ said Magdalen. ‘My pupil’s letter addressed a proposal to Mr. Noel Vanstone. I beg him to inform me why he has refused to consider it.’

‘My good lady!’ cried Noel Vanstone, arching his white eyebrows in satirical astonishment. ‘Are you really in earnest? Do you know what the proposal is? Have you seen the letter?’

‘I am quite in earnest,’ said Magdalen, ‘and I have seen the letter. It entreats you to remember how Mr. Andrew Vanstone’s fortune has come into your hands; it informs you that one-half of that fortune, divided between his daughters, was what his will intended them to have; and it asks of your sense of justice to do for his children, what he would have done for them himself if he had lived. In plainer words still, it asks you to give one-half of the money to the daughters, and it leaves you free to keep the other half yourself. That is the proposal. Why have you refused to consider it?’

‘For the simplest possible reason, Miss Garth,’ said Noel Vanstone, in high good humour. ‘Allow me to remind you of a well-known proverb: A fool and his money are soon parted. Whatever else I may be, ma’am, I’m not a fool.’

‘Don’t put it in that way, sir!’ remonstrated Mrs. Lecount. ‘Be serious—pray be serious!’

‘Quite impossible, Lecount,’ rejoined her master. ‘I can’t be serious. My poor father, Miss Garth, took a high moral point of view in this matter. Lecount, there, takes a high moral point of view—don’t you, Lecount? I do nothing of the sort. I have lived too long in the continental atmosphere to trouble myself about moral points of view. My course in this business is as plain as two and two make four. I have got the money, and I should be a born idiot if I parted with it. There is my point of view! Simple enough, isn’t it? I don’t stand on my dignity; I don’t meet you with the law, which is all on my side; I don’t blame your coming here, as a total stranger, to try and alter my resolution; I don’t blame the two girls for wanting to dip their fingers into my purse. All I say is, I am not fool enough to open it. *Pas si bête*, as we used to say in the English circle at Zurich. You understand French, Miss Garth? *Pas si bête!’* He set aside his plate of strawberries once more, and daintily dried his fingers on his fine white napkin.

Magdalen kept her temper. If she could have struck him dead by lifting her hand at that moment—it is probable she would have lifted it. But she kept her temper.

‘Am I to understand,’ she asked, ‘that the last words you have to say in this matter, are the words said for you in Mrs. Lecount’s letter?’

‘Precisely so,’ replied Noel Vanstone.

‘You have inherited your own father’s fortune, as well as the fortune of Mr. Andrew Vanstone, and yet you feel no obligation to act from motives of justice or generosity towards these two sisters? All you think it necessary to say to them is—you have got the money, and you refuse to part with a single farthing of it?’

‘Most accurately stated! Miss Garth, you are a woman of business. Lecount, Miss Garth is a woman of business.’

‘Don’t appeal to me, sir!’ cried Mrs. Lecount, gracefully wringing her plump white hands. ‘I can’t bear it! I must interfere! Let me suggest—oh, what do you call it in English?—a compromise. Dear Mr. Noel, you are perversely refusing to do yourself justice; you have better reasons than the reason you have given to Miss Garth. You follow your honoured father’s example; you feel it due to his memory to act in this matter as he acted

before you. That is his reason, Miss Garth—I implore you on my knees, take that as his reason. He will do what his dear father did; no more, no less. His dear father made a proposal, and he himself will now make that proposal, over again. Yes, Mr. Noel, you will remember what this poor girl says in her letter to you. Her sister has been obliged to go out as a governess; and she herself, in losing her fortune, has lost the hope of her marriage for years and years to come. You will remember this—and you will give the hundred pounds to one, and the hundred pounds to the other, which your admirable father offered in the past time? If he does this, Miss Garth, will he do enough? If he gives a hundred pounds each to these unfortunate sisters———?'

'He will repent the insult to the last hour of his life,' said Magdalen.

The instant that answer passed her lips, she would have given worlds to recall it. Mrs. Lecount had planted her sting in the right place at last. Those rash words of Magdalen's had burst from her passionately, in her own voice.

Nothing but the habit of public performance saved her from making the serious error that she had committed more palpable still, by attempting to set it right. Here, her past practice in the Entertainment came to her rescue, and urged her to go on instantly, in Miss Garth's voice, as if nothing had happened.

'You mean well, Mrs. Lecount,' she continued, 'but you are doing harm instead of good. My pupils will accept no such compromise as you propose. I am sorry to have spoken violently, just now; I beg you will excuse me.' She looked hard for information in the housekeeper's face while she spoke those conciliatory words. Mrs. Lecount baffled the look, by putting her handkerchief to her eyes. Had she, or had she not, noticed the momentary change in Magdalen's voice from the tones that were assumed to the tones that were natural? Impossible to say.

'What more can I do!' murmured Mrs. Lecount behind her handkerchief. 'Give me time to think—give me time to recover myself. May I retire, sir, for a moment? My nerves are shaken by this sad scene. I must have a glass of water, or I think I shall faint. Don't *go* yet, Miss Garth. I beg you will give us time to set this sad matter right, if we can—I beg you will remain until I come back.'

There were two doors of entrance to the room. One, the door into the front parlour, close at Magdalen's left hand. The other, the door into the back parlour, situated behind her. Mrs. Lecount politely retired—through the open folding-doors—by this latter means of exit, so as not to disturb the visitor by passing in front of her. Magdalen waited until she heard the door open and close again behind her; and then resolved to make the most of the opportunity which left her alone with Noel Vanstone. The utter hopelessness of rousing a generous impulse in that base nature, had now been proved by her own experience. The last chance left was to treat him like the craven creature he was, and to influence him through his fears.

Before she could speak, Noel Vanstone himself broke the silence. Cunningly as he strove to hide it, he was half angry, half alarmed at his housekeeper's desertion of him. He looked doubtingly at his visitor; he showed a nervous anxiety to conciliate her, until Mrs Lecount's return.

'Pray remember, ma'am, I never denied that this case was a hard one,' he began. 'You said just now you had no wish to offend me—and I'm sure I don't want to offend you. May I offer you some strawberries? Would you like to look at my father's bargains? I assure you, ma'am, I am naturally a gallant man; and I feel for both these sisters—especially the younger one. Touch me on the subject of the tender passion, and you touch me on a weak place. Nothing would please me more than to hear that Miss Vanstone's lover (I'm sure I always call her Miss Vanstone, and so does Lecount)—I say, ma'am, nothing would please me more than to hear that Miss Vanstone's lover had come back, and married her. If a loan of money would be likely to bring him back, and if

the security offered was good, and if my lawyer thought me justified———'

'Stop, Mr. Vanstone,' said Magdalen. 'You are entirely mistaken in your estimate of the person you have to deal with. You are seriously wrong in supposing that the marriage of the younger sister—if she could be married in a week's time—would make any difference in the convictions which induced her to write to your father and to you. I don't deny that she may act from a mixture of motives. I don't deny that she clings to the hope of hastening her marriage, and to the hope of rescuing her sister from a life of dependence. But, if both those objects were accomplished by other means, nothing would induce her to leave you in possession of the inheritance which her father meant his children to have. I know her, Mr. Vanstone! She is a nameless, homeless, friendless wretch. The law which takes care of you, the law which takes care of all legitimate children, casts her like carrion to the winds. It is your law—not hers. She only knows it as the instrument of a vile oppression, an insufferable wrong. The sense of that wrong haunts her, like a possession of the devil. The resolution to right that wrong bums in her like fire. If that miserable girl was married and rich with millions to-morrow, do you think she would move an inch from her purpose? I tell you she would resist, to the last breath in her body, the vile injustice which has struck at the helpless children, through the calamity of their father's death! I tell you she would shrink from no means which a desperate woman can employ, to force that closed hand of yours open, or die in the attempt!'

She stopped abruptly. Once more, her own indomitable earnestness had betrayed her. Once more, the inborn nobility of that perverted nature had risen superior to the deception which it had stooped to practise. The scheme of the moment vanished from her mind's view; and the resolution of her life burst its way outward in her own words, in her own tones, pouring hotly and more hotly from her heart. She saw the abject mannikin before her, cowering silent in his chair. Had his fears left him sense enough to perceive the change in her voice? No: *his* face spoke the truth—his fears had bewildered him. This time, the chance of the moment had befriended her. The door behind her chair had not opened again yet. 'No ears but his have heard me,' she thought, with a sense of unutterable relief. 'I have escaped Mrs. Lecount.'

She had done nothing of the kind. Mrs. Lecount had never left the room.

After opening the door and closing it again, without going out, the housekeeper had noiselessly knelt down behind Magdalen's chair. Steadying herself against the post of the folding-door, she took a pair of scissors from her pocket, waited until Noel Vanstone (from whose view she was entirely hidden) had attracted Magdalen's attention by speaking to her; and then bent forward with the scissors ready in her hand. The skirt of the false Miss Garth's gown—the brown alpaca dress, with the white spots on it—touched the floor, within the housekeeper's reach. Mrs. Lecount lifted the outer of the two flounces which ran round the bottom of the dress, one over the other; softly cut away a little irregular fragment of stuff from the inner flounce; and neatly smoothed the outer one over it again, so as to hide the gap. By the time she had put the scissors back in her pocket, and had risen to her feet (sheltering herself behind the post of the folding-door), Magdalen had spoken her last words. Mrs. Lecount quietly repeated the ceremony of opening and shutting the back parlour door; and returned to her place.

'What has happened, sir, in my absence?' she inquired, addressing her master with a look of alarm. 'You are pale; you are agitated! Oh, Miss Garth, have you forgotten the caution I gave you in the other room?'

'Miss Garth has forgotten everything,' cried Noel Vanstone, recovering his lost composure on the reappearance of Mrs. Lecount. 'Miss Garth has threatened me in the most outrageous manner. I forbid you to pity either of those two girls any more, Lecount—especially the younger one. She is the most desperate wretch I ever heard of! If she can't get my money by fair means, she threatens to have it by foul. Miss Garth has told me that to my face. To my face!' he repeated, folding his arms and looking mortally insulted.

‘Compose yourself, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘Pray compose yourself, and leave me to speak to Miss Garth.—I regret to hear, ma’am, that you have forgotten what I said to you in the next room. You have agitated Mr. Noel; you have compromised the interests you came here to plead; and you have only repeated what we knew before. The language you have allowed yourself to use in my absence, is the same language which your pupil was foolish enough to employ when she wrote for the second time, to my late master. How can a lady of your years and experience seriously repeat such nonsense? This girl boasts and threatens. She will do this; she will do that. You have her confidence, ma’am. Tell me, if you please, in plain words, what can she do?’

Sharply as the taunt was pointed, it glanced off harmless. Mrs. Lecount had planted her sting once too often. Magdalen rose in complete possession of her assumed character, and composedly terminated the interview. Ignorant as she was of what had happened behind her chair, she saw a change in Mrs. Lecount’s look and manner, which warned her to run no more risks, and to trust herself no longer in the house.

‘I am not in my pupil’s confidence,’ she said. ‘Her own acts will answer your question when the time comes. I can only tell you, from my own knowledge of her, that she is no boaster. What she wrote to Mr. Michael Vanstone, was what she was prepared to do—what, I have reason to think, she was actually on the point of doing, when her plans were overthrown by his death. Mr. Michael Vanstone’s son has only to persist in following his father’s course to find, before long, that I am not mistaken in my pupil, and that I have not come here to intimidate him by empty threats. My errand is done. I leave Mr. Noel Vanstone with two alternatives to choose from. I leave him to share Mr. Andrew Vanstone’s fortune with Mr. Andrew Vanstone’s daughters—or to persist in his present refusal and face the consequences.’ She bowed, and walked to the door.

Noel Vanstone started to his feet, with anger and alarm struggling which should express itself first in his blank white face. Before he could open his lips, Mrs. Lecount’s plump hands descended on his shoulders; put him softly back in his chair; and restored the plate of strawberries to its former position on his lap.

‘Refresh yourself, Mr. Noel, with a few more strawberries,’ she said; ‘and leave Miss Garth to me.’

She followed Magdalen into the passage, and closed the door of the room after her.

‘Are you residing in London, ma’am?’ asked Mrs. Lecount.

‘No,’ replied Magdalen. ‘I reside in the country.’

‘If I want to write to you, where can I address my letter?’

‘To the post-office, Birmingham,’ said Magdalen, mentioning the place which she had last left, and at which all letters were still addressed to her.

Mrs. Lecount repeated the direction to fix it in her memory—advanced two steps in the passage—and quietly laid her right hand on Magdalen’s arm.

‘A word of advice, ma’am,’ she said; ‘one word at parting. You are a bold woman and a clever woman. Don’t be too bold; don’t be too clever. You are risking more than you think for.’ She suddenly raised herself on tiptoe, and whispered the next words in Magdalen’s ear. ‘*I hold you in the hollow of my handV* said Mrs. Lecount, with a fierce hissing emphasis on every syllable. Her left hand clenched itself stealthily as she spoke. It was the hand in which she had concealed the fragment of stuff from Magdalen’s gown—the hand which held it fast at that moment.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Magdalen, pushing her back.

Mrs. Lecount glided away politely to open the house-door.

‘I mean nothing now,’ she said; ‘wait a little, and time may show. One last question, ma’am, before I bid you good-bye. When your pupil was a little innocent child, did she ever amuse herself by building a house of cards?’

Magdalen impatiently answered by a gesture in the affirmative.

‘Did you ever see her build up the house higher and higher,’ proceeded Mrs. Lecount, ‘till it was quite a pagoda of cards? Did you ever see her open her little child’s eyes wide, and look at it, and feel so proud of what she had done already, that she wanted to do more? Did you ever see her steady her pretty little hand, and hold her innocent breath, and put one other card on the top—and lay the whole house, the instant afterwards, a heap of ruins on the table? Ah, you have seen that. Give her, if you please, a friendly message from me. I venture to say she has built the house high enough already; and I recommend her to be careful before she puts on that other card.’

‘She shall have your message,’ said Magdalen, with Miss Garth’s bluntness, and Miss Garth’s emphatic nod of the head. ‘But I doubt her minding it. Her hand is rather steadier than you suppose; and I think she will put on the other card.’

‘And bring the house down,’ said Mrs. Lecount.

‘And build it up again,’ rejoined Magdalen. ‘I wish you good morning.’

‘Good morning,’ said Mrs. Lecount, opening the door. ‘One last word, Miss Garth. Do think of what I said in the back room! Do try the Golden Ointment for that sad affliction in your eyes!’

As Magdalen crossed the threshold of the door, she was met by the postman, ascending the house steps, with a letter picked out from the bundle in his hand. ‘Noel Vanstone, Esquire?’ she heard the man say interrogatively, as she made her way down the front garden to thè street.

She passed through the garden gate, little thinking from what new difficulty and new danger her timely departure had saved her. The letter which the postman had just delivered into the housekeeper’s hands, was no other than the anonymous letter addressed to Noel Vanstone by Captain Wragge.

Chapter IV

Mrs. Lecount returned to the parlour, with the fragment of Magdalen’s dress in one hand, and with Captain Wragge’s letter in the other.

‘Have you got rid of her?’ asked Noel Vanstone. ‘Have you shut the door at last on Miss Garth?’

‘Don’t call her Miss Garth, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount, smiling contemptuously. ‘She is as much Miss Garth as you are. We have been favoured by the performance of a clever masquerade; and if we had taken the disguise off our visitor, I think we should have found under it, Miss Vanstone herself.—Here is a letter for you, sir, which the postman has just left.’

She put the letter on the table within her master’s reach. Noel Vanstone’s amazement at the discovery just communicated to him, kept his whole attention concentrated on the housekeeper’s face. He never so much as

looked at the letter when she placed it before him.

‘Take my word for it, sir,’ proceeded Mrs. Lecount, composedly taking a chair. ‘When our visitor gets home she will put her grey hair away in a box, and will cure that sad affliction in her eyes with warm water and a sponge. If she had painted the marks on her face, as well as she painted the inflammation in her eyes, the light would have shown me nothing, and I should certainly have been deceived. But I saw the marks; I saw a young woman’s skin under that dirty complexion of hers; I heard, in this room, a true voice in a passion, as well as a false voice talking with an accent,—and I don’t believe in one morsel of that lady’s personal appearance from top to toe. The girl herself in my opinion, Mr. Noel—and a bold girl too.’

‘Why didn’t you lock the door and send for the police?’ asked Mr. Noel. ‘My father would have sent for the police. You know, as well as I do, Lecount, my father would have sent for the police.’

‘Pardon me, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount, ‘I think your father would have waited until he had got something more for the police to do than we have got for them yet. We shall see this lady again, sir. Perhaps, she will come here next time, with her own face and her own voice. I am curious to see what her own face is like. I am curious to know whether what I have heard of her voice in a passion, is enough to make me recognize her voice when she is calm. I possess a little memorial of her visit of which she is not aware; and she will not escape me so easily as she thinks If it turns out a useful memorial, you shall know what it is. If not, I will abstain from troubling you on so trifling a subject.—Allow me to remind you, sir, of the letter under your hand. You have not looked at it yet.’

Noel Vanstone opened the letter. He started as his eye fell on the first lines—hesitated—and then hurriedly read it through. The paper dropped from his hand, and he sank back in his chair. Mrs. Lecount sprang to her feet with the alacrity of a young woman, and picked up the letter.

‘What has happened, sir?’ she asked. Her face altered as she put the question; and her large black eyes hardened fiercely, in genuine astonishment and alarm.

‘Send for the police,’ exclaimed her master. ‘Lecount, I insist on being protected. Send for the police!’

‘May I read the letter, sir?’

He feebly waved his hand. Mrs. Lecount read the letter attentively, and put it aside, on the table, without a word, when she had done.

‘Have you nothing to say to me?’ asked Noel Vanstone, staring at his housekeeper in blank dismay. ‘Lecount, I’m to be robbed! The scoundrel who wrote that letter knows all about it, and won’t tell me anything unless I pay him. I’m to be robbed! Here’s property on this table worth thousands of pounds—property that can never be replaced—property that all the crowned heads in Europe could not produce if they tried. Lock me in, Lecount—and send for the police!’

Instead of sending for the police, Mrs. Lecount took a large green-paper fan from the chimney-piece, and seated herself opposite her master.

‘You are agitated, Mr. Noel,’ she said, ‘you are heated. Let me cool you.’

With her face as hard as ever—with less tenderness of look and manner than most women would have shown if they had been rescuing a half-drowned fly from a milk-jug—she silently and patiently fanned him for five minutes or more. No practised eye observing the peculiar bluish pallor of his complexion, and the marked difficulty with which he drew his breath, could have failed to perceive that the great organ of life was, in this man, what the housekeeper had stated it to be, too weak for the function which it was called on to perform. The

heart laboured over its work, as if it had been the heart of a worn-out old man.

‘Are you relieved, sir?’ asked Mrs. Lecount. ‘Can you think a little? Can you exercise your better judgment?’

She rose and put her hand over his heart, with as much mechanical attention and as little genuine interest, as if she had been feeling the plates at dinner to ascertain if they had been properly warmed. ‘Yes,’ she went on, seating herself again, and resuming the exercise of the fan; ‘you are getting better already, Mr. Noel.—Don’t ask me about this anonymous letter, until you have thought for yourself, and have given your own opinion first.’ She went on with the fanning, and looked him hard in the face all the time. ‘Think,’ she said; ‘think, sir, without troubling yourself to express your thoughts. Trust to my intimate sympathy with you to read them. Yes, Mr. Noel, this letter is a paltry attempt to frighten you. What does it say? It says you are the object of a conspiracy, directed by Miss Vanstone. We know that already—the lady of the inflamed eyes has told us. We snap our fingers at the conspiracy. What does the letter say next? It says the writer has valuable information to give you if you will pay for it. What did you call this person yourself, just now, sir?’

‘I called him a scoundrel,’ said Noel Vanstone, recovering his self-importance, and raising himself gradually in his chair.

‘I agree with you in that, sir, as I agree in everything else,’ proceeded Mrs. Lecount. ‘He is a scoundrel who really has this information, and who means what he says—or, he is a mouthpiece of Miss Vanstone’s; and she has caused this letter to be written for the purpose of puzzling us by another form of disguise. Whether the letter is true, or whether the letter is false—am I not reading your own wiser thoughts, now, Mr. Noel?—you know better than to put your enemies on their guard by employing the police in this matter, too soon. I quite agree with you—no police just yet. You will allow this anonymous man or anonymous woman, to suppose you are easily frightened; you will lay a trap for the information in return for the trap laid for your money; you will answer the letter and see what comes of the answer; and you will only pay the expense of employing the police, when you know the expense is necessary. I agree with you again—no expense, if we can help it. In every particular, Mr. Noel, my mind and your mind in this matter, are one.’

‘It strikes you in that light, Lecount—does it?’ said Noel Vanstone. ‘I think so, myself; I certainly think so. I won’t pay the police a farthing if I can possibly help it.’ He took up the letter again, and became fretfully perplexed over a second reading of it. ‘But the man wants money!’ he broke out, impatiently. ‘You seem to forget, Lecount, that the man wants money.’

‘Money which you offer him, sir,’ rejoined Mrs. Lecount; ‘but—as your thoughts have already anticipated—money which you don’t give him. No! no! you say to this man, “Hold out your hand, sir;” and when he has held it, you give him a smack for his pains, and put your own hand back in your pocket.—I am so glad to see you laughing, Mr. Noel! so glad to see you getting back your good spirits. We will answer the letter by advertisement, as the writer directs—advertisement is so cheap! Your poor hand is trembling a little—shall I hold the pen for you? I am not fit to do more; but I can always promise to hold the pen.’

Without waiting for his reply, she went into the back parlour, and returned with pen, ink, and paper. Arranging a blotting-book on her knees, and looking a model of cheerful submission, she placed herself once more in front of her master’s chair.

‘Shall I write from your dictation, sir?’ she inquired. ‘Or, shall I make a little sketch, and will you correct it afterwards? I will make a little sketch. Let me see the letter. We are to advertise in the Times, and we are to address, “An Unknown Friend.” What shall I say, Mr. Noel? Stay; I will write it, and then you can see for yourself: “An Unknown Friend is requested to mention (by advertisement) an address at which a letter can reach

him. The receipt of the information which he offers will be acknowledged by a reward of———" What sum of money do you wish me to set down, sir?'

'Set down nothing,' said Noel Vanstone, with a sudden outbreak of impatience. 'Money-matters are my business—I say money-matters are *my* business, Lecount. Leave it to me.'

'Certainly, sir,' replied Mrs. Lecount, handing her master the blotting-book. 'You will not forget to be liberal in offering money, when you know beforehand you don't mean to part with it?'

'Don't dictate, Lecount! I won't submit to dictation!' said Noel Vanstone, asserting his own independence more and more impatiently. 'I mean to conduct this business for myself. I am master, Lecount!'

'You are master, sir.'

'My father was master before me. And I am my father's son. I tell you, Lecount, I am my father's son!'

Mrs. Lecount bowed submissively.

'I mean to set down any sum of money I think right,' pursued Noel Vanstone, nodding his little flaxen head vehemendy. 'I mean to send this advertisement myself. The servant shall take it to the stationer's to be put into the Times. When I ring the bell twice, send the servant. You understand, Lecount? Send the servant.'

Mrs. Lecount bowed again and walked slowly to the door. She knew to a nicety when to lead her master, and when to let him go alone. Experience had taught her to govern him in all essential points, by giving way to him afterwards on all points of minor detail. It was a characteristic of his weak nature—as it is of all weak natures—to assert itself obstinately on trifles. The filling in of the blank in the advertisement, was the trifle in this case; and Mrs. Lecount quieted her master's suspicions that she was leading him, by instantly conceding it. 'My mule has kicked,' she thought to herself, in her own language, as she opened the door. 'I can do no more with him to-day.'

'Lecount!' cried her master, as she stepped into the passage. 'Come back.'

Mrs. Lecount came back.

'You're not offended with me, are you?' asked Noel Vanstone, uneasily.

'Certainly not, sir,' replied Mrs. Lecount. 'As you said just now—you are master.'

'Good creature! Give me your hand.' He kissed her hand, and smiled in high approval of his own affectionate proceeding. 'Lecount, you are a worthy creature!'

'Thank you, sir,' said Mrs. Lecount. She curtseyed and went out. 'If he had any brains in that monkey-head of his,' she said to herself in the passage, 'what a rascal he would be!'

Left by himself, Noel Vanstone became absorbed in anxious reflection over the blank space in the advertisement. Mrs. Lecount's apparently superfluous hint to him, to be liberal in offering money when he knew he had no intention of parting with it, had been founded on an intimate knowledge of his character. He had inherited his father's sordid love of money, without inheriting his father's hard-headed capacity for seeing the uses to which money can be put. His one idea in connection with his wealth, was the idea of keeping it. He was such an inborn miser, that the bare prospect of being liberal in theory only, daunted him. He took up the pen; laid it down again; and read the anonymous letter for the third time, shaking his head over it suspiciously. 'If I offer this man a large sum of money,' he thought, on a sudden; 'how do I know he may not find a means of

actually making me pay it? Women tire always in a hurry. Lecount is always in a hurry. I have got the afternoon before me—I'll take the afternoon to consider it.'

He fretfully put away the blotting-book, and the sketch of the advertisement, on the chair which Mrs. Lecount had just left. As he returned to his own seat, he shook his little head solemnly, and arranged his white dressing-gown over his knees, with the air of a man absorbed in anxious thought. Minute after minute passed away; the quarters tmd the h£df-hours succeeded each other on the dial of Mrs. Lecount's watch—and still Noel Vanstone remained lost in doubt; still no summons for the servant disturbed the tranquillity of the parlour bell.

Meanwhile, after parting with Mrs. Lecount, Magdalen had cautiously abstained from crossing the road to her lodgings, and had only ventured to return after making a circuit in the neighbourhood. When she found herself once more in Vauxhall Walk, the first object which attracted her attention, was a cab drawn up before the door of the lodgings. A few steps more in advance showed her the landlady's daughter, standing at the cab-door, engaged in a dispute with the driver on the subject of his fare. Noticing that the girl's back was turned towards her, Magdalen instantly profited by that circumstance, and slipped unobserved into the house.

She glided along the passage; ascended the stairs; and found herself, on the first landing, face to face with her travelling companion! There stood Mrs. Wragge, with a pile of small parcels hugged up in her arms, anxiously waiting the issue of the dispute with the cabman in the street. To return was impossible—the sound of the angry voices below, was advancing into the passage. To hesitate was worse than useless. But one choice was left—the choice of going on—and Magdalen desperately took it. She pushed by Mrs. Wragge, without a word; ran into her own room; tore off her cloak, bonnet, and wig; and threw them down out of sight, in the blank space between the sofa-bedstead and the wall.

For the first few moments, astonishment bereft Mrs. Wragge of the power of speech and rooted her to the spot where she stood. Two out of the collection of parcels in her arms fell from them on the stairs. The sight of that catastrophe roused her. 'Thieves!' cried Mrs. Wragge, suddenly struck by an idea. 'Thieves!'

Magdalen heard her through the room door, which she had not had time to close completely. 'Is that you, Mrs. Wragge?' she called out in her own voice. 'What is the matter?' She snatched up a towel while she spoke; dipped it in water; and passed it rapidly over the lower part of her face. At the sound of the familiar voice, Mrs. Wragge turned round—dropped a third parcel—and, forgetting it in her astonishment, ascended the second flight of stairs. Magdalen stepped out on the first-floor landing, with the towel held over her forehead as if she was suffering from headache. Her false eyebrows required time for their removal, and a headache assumed for the occasion, suggested the most convenient pretext she could devise for biding them as they were hidden now.

'What are you disturbing the house for?' she asked. 'Pray be quiet, I am half blind with the headache.'

'Anything wrong, ma'am?' inquired the landlady, from the passage.

'Nothing whatever,' replied Magdalen. 'My friend is timid; and the dispute with the cabman has frightened her. Pay the man what he wants, and let him go.'

'Where is She?' asked Mrs. Wragge, in a tremulous whisper. 'Where's the woman who scuttled by me into your room?'

'Pooh!' said Magdalen. 'No woman scuttled by you—as you call it. Look in and see for yourself.'

She threw open the door. Mrs. Wragge walked into the room—looked all over it—saw nobody—and indicated her astonishment at the result, by dropping a fourth parcel, and trembling helplessly from head to foot.

‘I saw her go in here,’ said Mrs. Wragge, in awe-struck accents. ‘A woman in a grey cloak and a poke bonnet. A rude woman. She scuttled by me, on the stairs—she did. Here’s the room, and no woman in it. Give us a Prayer-Book!’ cried Mrs. Wragge, turning deadly pale, and letting her whole remaining collection of parcels fall about her in a little cascade of commodities. ‘I want to read something Good. I want to think of my latter end. I’ve seen a Ghost!’

‘Nonsense!’ said Magdalen. ‘You’re dreaming; the shopping has been too much for you. Go into your own room, and take your bonnet off.’

‘I’ve heard tell of ghosts in nightgowns; ghosts in sheets; and ghosts in chains,’ proceeded Mrs Wragge, standing petrified in her own magic circle of linen-drapers’ parcels. ‘Here’s a worse ghost than any of ’em—a ghost in a grey cloak and a poke bonnet. I know what it is,’ continued Mrs. Wragge, melting into penitent tears. ‘It’s a judgment on me for being so happy away from the captain. It’s a judgment on me for having been down at heel in half the shops in London, first with one shoe and then with the other, all the time I’ve been out. I’m a sinful creature. Don’t let go of me—whatever you do, my dear, don’t let go of me!’ She caught Magdalen fast by the arm, and fell into another trembling fit at the bare idea of being left by herself.

The one remaining chance, in such an emergency as this, was to submit to circumstances. Magdalen took Mrs. Wragge to a chair; having first placed it in such a position as might enable her to turn her back on her travelling-companion, while she removed the false eyebrows by the help of a litde water. ‘Wait a minute there,’ she said; ‘and try if you can compose yourself, while I bathe my head.’

‘Compose myself?’ repeated Mrs. Wragge. ‘How am I to compose myself when my head feels off my shoulders? The worst Buzzing I ever had with the Cookery-book, was nothing to the Buzzing I’ve got now with the Ghost. Here’s a miserable end to a holiday! You may take me back again, my dear, whenever you like—I’ve had enough of it already!’

Having at last succeeded in removing the eyebrows, Magdalen was free to combat the unfortunate impression produced on her companion’s mind, by every weapon of persuasion which her ingenuity could employ.

The attempt proved useless. Mrs. Wragge persisted—on evidence which, it may be remarked in parenthesis, would have satisfied many wiser ghost-seers than herself—in believing that she had been supernaturally favoured by a visitor from the world of spirits. All that Magdalen could do was to ascertain by cautious investigation, that Mrs. Wragge had not been quick enough to identify the supposed ghost with the character of the old north-country lady in the Entertainment. Having satisfied herself on this point, she had no resource but to leave the rest to the natural incapability of retaining impressions—unless those impressions were perpetually renewed—which was one of the characteristic infirmities of her companion’s weak mind. After fortifying Mrs. Wragge by reiterated assurances that one appearance (according to all the laws and regulations of ghosts) meant nothing, unless it was immediately followed by two more—after patiently leading back her attention to the parcels dropped on the floor, and on the stairs—and after promising to keep the door of communication ajar between the two rooms, if Mrs. Wragge would engage on her side to retire to her own chamber, and to say no more on the terrible subject of the ghost—Magdalen at last secured the privilege of reflecting uninterruptedly on the events of that memorable day.

Two serious consequences had followed her first step forward. Mrs. Lecount had entrapped her into speaking in her own voice; and accident had confronted her with Mrs. Wragge, in disguise.

What advantage had she gained to set against these disasters? The advantage of knowing more of Noel Vanstone and of Mrs. Lecount, than she might have discovered in months, if she had trusted to inquiries made

for her by others. One uncertainty which had hitherto perplexed her, was set at rest already. The scheme she had privately devised against Michael Vanstone—which Captain Wragge's sharp insight had partially penetrated, when she first warned him that their partnership must be dissolved—was a scheme which she could now plainly see must be abandoned as hopeless, in the case of Michael Vanstone's son. The father's habits of speculation had been the pivot on which the whole machinery of her meditated conspiracy had been constructed to turn. No such vantage ground was discoverable in the doubly sordid character of the son. Noel Vanstone was invulnerable on the very point which had presented itself in his father as open to attack.

Having reached this conclusion, how was she to shape her future course? What new means could she discover, which would lead her secretly to her end, in defiance of Mrs. Lecount's malicious vigilance, and Noel Vanstone's miserly distrust?

She was seated before the looking-glass, mechanically combing out her hair, while that all-important consideration occupied her mind. The agitation of the moment had raised a feverish colour in her cheeks, and had brightened the light in her large grey eyes. She was conscious of looking her best; conscious how her beauty gained by contrast, after the removal of the disguise. Her lovely light brown hair, looked thicker and softer than ever, now that it had escaped from its imprisonment under the grey wig. She twisted it this way and that, with quick dexterous fingers; she laid it in masses on her shoulders; she threw it back from them in a heap, and turned sideways to see .how it fell—to see her back and shoulders, freed from the artificial deformities of the padded cloak. After a moment, she faced the looking-glass once more; plunged both hands deep in her hair; and, resting her elbows on the table, looked closer and closer at the reflection of herself, until her breath began to dim the glass. 'I can twist any man alive round my finger,' she thought, with a smile of superb triumph, 'as long as I keep my looks! If that contemptible wretch saw me now———' She shrank from following that thought to its end, with a sudden horror of herself: she drew back from the glass, shuddering, and put her hands over her face. 'Oh, Frank!' she murmured, 'but for you, what a wretch I might be!' Her eager fingers snatched the little white silk bag from its hiding-place in her bosom; her lips devoured it with silent kisses. 'My darling! my angel! Oh, Frank, how I love you!' The tears gushed into her eyes. She passionately dried them, restored the bag to its place, and turned her back on the looking-glass. 'No more of myself,' she thought; 'no more of my mad, miserable self for to-day!'

Shrinking from all further contemplation of her next step in advance—shrinking from the fast darkening future, with which Noel Vanstone was now associated in her inmost thoughts—she looked impatiently about the room for some homely occupation which might take her out of herself. The disguise which she had flung down between the wall and the bed recurred to her memory. It was impossible to leave it there. Mrs. Wragge (now occupied in sorting her parcels) might weary of her employment, might come in again at a moment's notice, might pass near the bed and see the grey cloak. What was to be done?

Her first thought was to put the disguise back in her trunk. But, after what had happened, there was danger in trusting it so near to herself, while she and Mrs. Wragge were together under the same roof. She resolved to be rid of it that evening, and boldly determined on sending it back to Birmingham. Her bonnet-box fitted into her trunk. She took the box out, thrust in the wig and cloak; and remorselessly flattened down the bonnet at the top. The gown (which she had not yet taken off) was her own; Mrs. Wragge had been accustomed to see her in it—there was no need to send the gown back. Before closing the box, she hastily traced these lines on a sheet of paper: 'I took the enclosed things away by mistake. Please keep them for me with the rest of my luggage in your possession, until you hear from me again.' Putting the paper on the top of the bonnet, she directed the box to Captain Wragge, at Birmingham; took it down stairs immediately; and sent the landlady's daughter away with it to the nearest Receiving House. 'That difficulty is disposed of,' she thought, as she went back to her own room again.

Mrs. Wragge was still occupied in sorting her parcels, on her narrow little bed. She turned round with a faint scream, when Magdalen looked in at her. ‘I thought it was the ghost again,’ said Mrs. Wragge. ‘I’m trying to take warning, my dear, by what’s happened to me. I’ve put all my parcels straight, just as the captain would like to see ’em. I’m up at heel with both shoes. If I close my eyes to-night—which I don’t think I shall—I’ll go to sleep as straight as my legs will let me. And I’ll never have another holiday as long as I live. I hope I shall be forgiven,’ said Mrs. Wragge, mournfully shaking her head. ‘I humbly hope I shall be forgiven.’

‘Forgiven!’ repeated Magdalen. ‘If other women wanted as little forgiving as you do———Well! well! Suppose you open some of these parcels. Come! I want to see what you have been buying to-day.’

Mrs. Wragge hesitated, sighed penitendy, considered a litde, stretched out her hand timidly towards one of the parcels, thought of the supernatural warning, and shrank back from her own purchases with a desperate exertion of self-control.

‘Open this one,’ said Magdalen, to encourage her: ‘What is it?’

Mrs. Wragge’s faded blue eyes began to brighten dimly, in spite of her remorse; but she self-denyingly shook her head. The master passion of shopping might claim his own again—but the ghost was not laid yet.

‘Did you get it a bargain?’ asked Magdalen, confidentially.

‘Dirt cheap!’ cried poor Mrs. Wragge, falling headlong into the snare, and darting at the parcel as eagerly as if nothing had happened.

Magdalen kept her gossiping over her purchases, for an hour or more; and then wisely determined to distract her attention from all ghostly recollections, in another way, by taking her out for a walk.

As they left the lodgings, the door of Noel Vanstone’s house opened, and the woman-servant appeared, bent on another errand. She was apparently charged with a letter on this occasion, which she carried carefully in her hand. Conscious of having formed no plan yet, either for attack or defence, Magdalen wondered, with a momentary dread, whether Mrs. Lecount had decided already on opening fresh communications, and whether the letter was directed to ‘Miss Garth.’

The letter bore no such address. Noel Vanstone had solved his pecuniary problem at last. The blank space in the advertisement was filled up; and Mrs. Lecount’s acknowledgment of the captain’s anonymous warning, was now on its way to insertion in the Times.

the end of the third scene

Between the Scenes

Progress of the Story through the Post

Wilkie Collins

I. *Extract from the Advertising Columns of The Times:—*

‘An Unknown Friend is requested to mention (by advertisement) an address at which a letter can reach him. The receipt of the information which he offers, will be acknowledged by a reward of Five Pounds.’

II. *From Captain Wragge to Magdalen*

‘Birmingham, July 2nd, 1847.

‘My Dear Girl,

‘The box containing the articles of costume which you took away by mistake, has come safely to hand. Consider it under my special protection, until I hear from you again.

‘I embrace this opportunity to assure you, once more, of my unalterable fidelity to your interests. Without attempting to intrude myself into your confidence, may I inquire whether Mr. Noel Vanstone has consented to do you justice? I greatly fear he has declined—in which case, I can lay my hand on my heart, and solemnly declare that his meanness revolts me. Why do I feel a foreboding that you have appealed to him in vain? Why do I find myself viewing this fellow in the light of a noxious insect? We are total strangers to each other; I have no sort of knowledge of him, except the knowledge I picked up in making your inquiries. Has my intense sympathy with your interests made my perceptions prophetic? or, to put it fancifully, is there really such a thing as a former state of existence? and has Mr. Noel Vanstone mortally insulted me—say, in some other planet?

‘I write, my dear Magdalen, as you see, with my customary dash of humour. But I am serious in placing my services at your disposal. Don’t let the question of terms cause you an instant’s hesitation. I accept, beforehand, any terms you like to mention. If your present plans point that way—I am ready to squeeze Mr. Noel Vanstone, in your interests, till the gold oozes out of him at every pore. Pardon the coarseness of this metaphor. My anxiety to be of service to you rushes into words; lays my meaning, in the rough, at your feet; and leaves your taste to polish it with the choicest ornaments of the English language.

‘How is my unfortunate wife? I am afraid you find it quite impossible to keep her up at heel, or to mould her

personal appearance into harmony with the eternal laws of symmetry and order. Does she attempt to be too familiar with you? I have always been accustomed to check her, in this respect. She has never been permitted to call me anything but Captain; and on the rare occasions, since our union, when circumstances may have obliged her to address me by letter, her opening form of salutation has been rigidly restricted to “Dear Sir.” Accept these trifling domestic particulars as suggesting hints which may be useful to you in managing Mrs. Wragge; and believe me, in anxious expectation of hearing from you again,

‘Devotedly yours,

‘Horatio Wragge.’

III. *From Norah to Magdalen*

Forwarded, with the Two Letters that follow it, from the Post Office, Birmingham

‘Westmoreland House, Kensington,

‘July 1st.

‘My Dearest Magdalen,

‘When you write next (and pray write soon!) address your letter to me at Miss Garth’s. I have left my situation; and some little time may elapse before I find another.

‘Now it is all over, I may acknowledge to you, my darling, that I was not happy. I tried hard to win the affection of the two little girls I had to teach; but they seemed, I am sure I can’t tell why, to dislike me from the first. Their mother I have no reason to complain of. But their grandmother, who was really the ruling power in the house, made my life very hard to me. My inexperience in teaching was a constant subject of remark with her; and my difficulties with the children were always visited on me as if they had been entirely of my own making. I tell you this, so that you may not suppose I regret having left my situation. Far from it, my love—I am glad to be out of the house.

‘I have saved a little money, Magdalen; and I should so like to spend it in staying a few days with you. My heart aches for a sight of my sister; my ears are weary for the sound of her voice. A word from you, telling me where we can meet, is all I want. Think of it—pray think of it.

‘Don’t suppose I am discouraged by this first check. There are many kind people in the world; and some of them may employ me next time. The way to happiness is often very hard to find; harder, I almost think, for women than for men. But, if we only try patiently, and try long enough, we reach it at last—in Heaven, if not on earth. I think *my* way now, is the way which leads to seeing you again. Don’t forget that, my love, the next time you think of

‘Norah.’

IV. *From Miss Garth to Magdalen*

‘Westmoreland House, July 1st.

‘My Dear Magdalen,

‘You have no useless remonstrances to apprehend, at the sight of my handwriting. My only object in this letter is to tell you something, which I know your sister will not tell you of her own accord. She is entirely ignorant that I am writing to you. Keep her in ignorance, if you wish to spare her unnecessary anxiety—and me unnecessary distress.

‘Norah’s letter, no doubt, tells you that she has left her situation. I feel it my painful duty to add, that she has left it on your account.

‘The matter occurred in this manner. Messrs. Wyatt, Pendril, and Gwilt are the solicitors of the gendeman in whose family Norah was employed. The life which you have chosen for yourself was known, as long ago as December last, to all the partners. You were discovered performing in public at Derby by the person who had been employed to trace you at York; and that discovery was communicated by Mr. Wyatt to Norah’s employer, a few days since, in reply to direct inquiries about you on that gentleman’s part. His wife, and his mother (who lives with him) had expressly desired that he would make those inquiries; their doubts having been aroused by Norah’s evasive answers when they questioned her about her sister. You know Norah too well to blame her for this. Evasion was the only escape your present life had left her from telling a downright falsehood.

‘That same day, the two ladies of the family, the elder and the younger, sent for your sister; and told her they had discovered that you were a public performer, roaming from place to place in the country, under an assumed name. They were just enough not to blame Norah for this;'they were just enough to acknowledge that her conduct had been as irreproachable, as I had guaranteed it should be when I got her the situation. But, at the same time, they made it a positive condition of her continuing in their employment, that she should never permit you to visit her at their house—or to meet her and walk out with her when she was in attendance on the children. Your sister—who has patiently born all hardships that fell on herself—instantly resented the slur cast on *you*. She gave her employers warning on the spot. High words followed; and she left the house that evening.

‘I have no wish to distress you by representing the loss of this situation in the light of a disaster. Norah was not so happy in it, as I had hoped and believed she would be. It was impossible for me to know beforehand, that the children were sullen and intractable—or that the husband’s mother was accustomed to make her domineering disposition felt by every one in the house. I will readily admit that Norah is well out of this situation. But the harm does not stop here. For all you and I know to the contrary, the harm may go on. What has happened in this situation, may happen in another. Your way of life, however pure your conduct may be—and I will do you the justice to believe it pure—is a suspicious way of life to all respectable people. I have lived long enough in this world to know, that the Sense of Propriety, in nine Englishwomen out of ten, makes no allowances and feels no pity. Norah’s next employers may discover you; and Norah may throw up a situation next time, which we may never be able to find for her again.

‘I leave you to consider this. My child! don’t think I am hard on you. I am jealous for your sister’s tranquillity. If you will forget the past, Magdalen, and come back—trust to your old governess to forget it too, and to give you the home which your father and mother once gave her.

‘Your friend, my dear, always,

‘Harriet Garth.’

V. *From Francis Clare, Jun., to Magdalen*

‘Shanghai, China,

‘April 23rd, 1847.

‘My Dear Magdalen,

‘I have deferred answering your letter, in consequence of the distracted state of my mind, which made me unfit to write to you. I am still unfit—but I feel I ought to delay no longer. My sense of honour fortifies me; and I undergo the pain of writing this letter.

‘My prospects in China are all at an end. The Firm, to which I was brutally consigned as if I was a bale of merchandise, has worn out my patience by a series of petty insults; and I have felt compelled from motives of self-respect, to withdraw my services, which were undervalued from the first. My returning to England, under these circumstances, is out of the question. I have been too cruelly used in my own country to wish to go back to it—even if I could. I propose embarking on board a private trading vessel in these seas, in a mercantile capacity, to make my way, if I can, for myself. How it will end, or what will happen to me next, is more than I can say. It matters little what becomes of me. I am a wanderer and an exile, entirely through the fault of others. The unfeeling desire at home to get rid of me, has accomplished its object. I am got rid of for good.

‘There is only one more sacrifice left for me to make—the sacrifice of my heart’s dearest feelings. With no prospects before me, with no chance of coming home, what hope can I feel of performing my engagement to yourself? None! A more selfish man than I am, might hold you to that engagement; a less considerate man than I am, might keep you waiting for years—and to no purpose after all. Cruelly as they have been trampled on, my feelings are too sensitive to allow me to do this. I write it with the tears in my eyes—you shall not link your fate to an outcast. Accept these heart-broken lines as releasing you from your promise. Our engagement is at an end.

‘The one consolation which supports me, in bidding you farewell, is—that neither of us is to blame. You may have acted weakly, under my father’s influence, but I am sure you acted for the best. Nobody knew what the fatal consequences of driving me out of England would be, but myself—and I was not listened to. I yielded to my father, I yielded to you; and this is the end of it!

‘I am suffering too acutely to write more. May you never know what my withdrawal from our engagement has cost me! I beg you will not blame yourself. It is not your fault that I have had all my energies misdirected by others—it is not your fault that I have never had a fair chance of getting on in life. Forget the deserted wretch, who breathes his heartfelt prayers for your happiness, and who will ever remain your friend and well-wisher,

‘Francis Clare, Jun.’

VI. *From Francis Clare, Sen., to Magdalen*

Enclosing the preceding Letter

‘I always told your poor father my son was a Fool; but I never knew he was a Scoundrel until the mail came in from China. I have every reason to believe that he has left his employers under the most disgraceful

circumstances. Forget him from this time forth, as I do. When you and I last set eyes on each other, you behaved well to me in this business. All I can now say in return, I do say. My girl, I am sorry for you.

‘F. C.’

VII. *From Mrs. Wragge to Her Husband*

‘dear sir for mercy’s sake come here and help us She had a dreadful letter I don’t know what yesterday but she read it in bed and when I went in with her breakfast I found her dead and if the doctor had not been two doors off nobody else could have brought her to life again and she sits and looks dreadful and wont speak a word her eyes frighten me so I shake from head to foot oh please do come I keep things as tidy as I can and I do like her so and she used to be so kind to me and the landlord says he’s afraid she’ll destroy herself I wish I could write straight but I do shake so your dutiful wife matilda wragge excuse faults and beg you on my knees come and help us the Doctor good man will put some of his own writing into this for fear you can’t make out mine and remain once more your dutiful wife matilda wragge.’

Added by the Doctor

‘Sir,—I beg to inform you that I was yesterday called into a neighbour’s, in Vauxhall Walk, to attend a young lady who had been suddenly taken ill. I recovered her with great difficulty from one of the most obstinate fainting fits I ever remember to have met with. Since that time she has had no relapse, but there is apparently some heavy distress weighing on her mind, which it has hitherto been found impossible to remove. She sits, as I am informed, perfectly silent, and perfectly unconscious of what goes on about her, for hours together, with a letter in her hand, which she will allow nobody to take from her. If this state of depression continues, very distressing mental consequences may follow; and I only do my duty in suggesting that some relative or friend should interfere who has influence enough to rouse her.

‘Your obedient servant,

‘Richard Jarvis, M.R.C.S.’

VIII. *From Norah to Magdalen*

‘July 5th.

‘For God’s sake, write me one line to say if you are still at Birmingham, and where I can find you there! I have just heard from old Mr. Clare. Oh, Magdalen, if you have no pity on yourself, have some pity on me! The thought of you alone among strangers, the thought of you heart-broken under this dreadful blow, never leaves me for an instant. No words can tell how I feel for you! My own love, remember the better days at home before that cowardly villain stole his way into your heart; remember the happy time at Combe-Raven, when we were always together. Oh, don’t, don’t treat me like a stranger! We are alone in the world now—let me come and comfort you—let me be more than a sister to you, if I can. One line—only one line to tell me where I can find

you!’

IX. *From Magdalen to Norah*

‘July 7th.

‘My Dearest Norah,

‘All that your love for me can wish, your letter has done. You, and you alone, have found your way to my heart. I could think again, I could feel again, after reading what you have written to me. Let this assurance quiet your anxieties. My mind lives and breathes once more—it was dead until I got your letter.

‘The shock I have suffered has left a strange quietness in me. I feel as if I had parted from my former self—as if the hopes, once so dear to me, had all gone back to some past time, from which I am now far removed. I can look at the wreck of my life more calmly, Norah, than you could look at it, if we were both together again. I can trust myself, already, to write to Frank.

‘My darling, I think no woman ever knows how utterly she has given herself up to the man she loves—until that man has ill-treated her. Can you pity my weakness if I confess to having felt a pang at my heart when I read that part of your letter which calls Frank a coward and a villain? Nobody can despise me for this, as I despise myself. I am like a dog who crawls back and licks the master’s hand that has beaten him. But it is so—I would confess it to nobody but you—indeed, indeed it is so. He has deceived and deserted me; he has written me a cruel farewell—but don’t call him a villain! If he repented, and came back to me, I would die rather than marry him now—but it grates on me to see that word coward written against him in your hand! If he is weak. of purpose, who tried his weakness beyond what it could bear? Do you think this would have happened if Michael Vanstone had not robbed us of our own, and forced Frank away from me to China? In a week from to-day, the year of waiting would have come to an end; and I should have been Frank’s wife, if my marriage portion had not been taken from me.

‘You will say—after what has happened, it is well that I have escaped. My love! there is something perverse in my heart, which answers—No! Better have been Frank’s wretched wife than the free woman I am now.

‘I have not written to him. He sends me no address at which I could write, even if I would. But I have not the wish. I will wait, before I send him *my* farewell. If a day ever comes when I have the fortune which my father once promised I should bring to him—do you know what I would do with it? I would send it all to Frank, as my revenge on him for his letter; as the last farewell word, on my side, to the man who has deserted me. Let me live for that day! Let me live, Norah, in the hope of better times for *you*, which is all the hope I have left. When I think of your hard life, I can almost feel the tears once more in my weary eyes. I can almost think I have come back again to my former self.

‘You will not think me hard-hearted and ungrateful, if I say that we must wait a litde yet, before we meet? I want to be more fit to see you than I am now. I want to put Frank farther away from me, and to bring you nearer still. Are these good reasons? I don’t know—don’t ask me for reasons. Take the kiss I have put for you here, where the litde circle is drawn on the paper; and let that bring us together for the present, till I write again. Good-bye, my love. My heart is true to you, Norah—but I dare not see you yet.

‘Magdalen.’

X. *From Magdalen to Miss Garth*

‘My dear Miss Garth,

‘I have been long in answering your letter; but you know what has happened, and you will forgive me.

‘All that I have to say may be said in few words. You may depend on my never making the general Sense of Propriety my enemy again: I am getting knowledge enough of the world to make it my accomplice next time. Norah will never leave another situation on my account—my life, as a public performer, is at an end. It was harmless enough, God knows—I may live, and so may you, to mourn the day when I parted from it—but I shall never return to it again. It has left me, as Frank has left me, as all my better thoughts have left me—except my thoughts of Norah.

‘Enough of myself! Shall I tell you some news to brighten this dull letter? Mr. Michael Vanstone is dead; and Mr. Noel Vanstone has succeeded to the possession of my fortune and Norah’s. He is quite worthy of his inheritance. In his father’s place, he would have ruined us as his father did.

‘I have no more to say that you would care to know. Don’t be distressed about me. I am trying to recover my spirits—I am trying to forget the poor deluded girl who was foolish enough to be fond of Frank, in the old days at Combe-Raven. Sometimes, a pang comes which tells me the girl won’t be forgotten—but not often.

‘It was very kind of you, when you wrote to such a lost creature as I am, to sign yourself *always my friend*. “Always” is a bold word, my dear old governess! I wonder whether you will ever want to recall it? It will make no difference, if you do, in the gratitude I shall always feel for the trouble you took with me, when I was a little girl. I have ill repaid that trouble—ill repaid your kindness to me in after life. I ask your pardon and your pity. The best thing you can do for both of us, is to forget me. Affectionately yours,

‘Magdalen.

‘P.S.—I open the envelope to add one line. For God’s sake, don’t show this letter to Norah!’

XI. *From Magdalen to Captain Wragge*

‘Vauxhall Walk, July 17th.

‘If I am not mistaken, it was arranged that I should write to you at Birmingham, as soon as I felt myself composed, enough to think of the future. My mind is settled at last; and I am now able to accept the services which you have unreservedly offered to me.

‘I beg you will forgive the manner in which I received you, on your arrival in this house, after hearing the news of my sudden illness. I was quite incapable of controlling myself—I was suffering an agony of mind which for the time deprived me of my senses. It is only your due that I should now thank you for treating me with great forbearance, at a time when forbearance was mercy.

‘I will mention what I wish you to do, as plainly and briefly as I can.

‘In the first place, I request you to dispose (as privately as possible) of every article of costume used in the dramatic Entertainment. I have done with our performances for ever; and I wish to be set free from everything which might accidentally connect me with them in the future. The key of my box is enclosed in this letter.

‘The other box, which contains my own dresses, you will be kind enough to forward to this house. I do not ask you to bring it yourself, because I have a far more important commission to intrust to you.

‘Referring to the note which you left for me at your departure, I conclude that you have, by this time, traced Mr. Noel Vanstone from Vauxhall Walk to the residence which he is now occupying. If you have made the discovery—and if you are quite sure of not having drawn the attention either of Mrs. Lecount or her master to yourself—I wish you to arrange immediately for my residing (with you and Mrs. Wragge) in the same town or village in which Mr. Noel Vanstone has taken up his abode. I write this, it is hardly necessary to say, under the impression that, wherever he may now be living, he is setded in the place for some litde time.

‘If you can find a small furnished house for me on these conditions, which is to be let by the month, take it for a month certain to begin with. Say that it is for your wife, your niece, and yourself; and use any assumed name you please, as long as it is a name that can be trusted to defeat the most suspicious inquiries. I leave this to your experience in such matters. The secret of who we really are, must be kept as strictly as if it was a secret on which our fives depend.

‘Any expenses to which you may be put in carrying out my wishes, I will immediately repay. If you easily find the sort of house I want, there is no need for your returning to London to fetch us. We can join you as soon as we know where to go. The house must be perfectly respectable, and must be reasonably near to Mr. Noel Vanstone’s present residence, wherever that is.

‘You must allow me to be silent in this letter as to the object which I have now in view. I am unwilling to risk an explanation in writing. When all our preparations are made, you shall hear what I propose to do from my own lips; and I shall expect you to tell me plainly in return, whether you will, or will not, give me the help I want, on the best terms which I am able to offer you.

‘One word more before I seal up this letter.

‘If any opportunity falls in your way, after you have taken the house, and before we join you, of exchanging a few civil words either with Mr. Noel Vanstone or Mrs. Lecount, take advantage of it. It is very important to my present object that we should become acquainted with each other—as the purely accidental result of our being near neighbours. I want you to smooth the way towards this end, if you can, before Mrs. Wragge and I come to you. Pray throw away no chance of observing Mrs. Lecount, in particular, very carefully. Whatever help you can give me at the outset, in blindfolding that woman’s sharp eyes, will be the most precious help I have ever received at your hands.

‘There is no need to answer this letter immediately—unless I have written it under a mistaken impression of what you have accomplished since leaving London. I have taken our lodgings on for another week; and I can wait to hear from you, until you are able to send me such news as I wish to receive. You may be quite sure of my patience for the future, under all possible circumstances. My caprices are at an end; and my violent temper has tried your forbearance for the last time.

‘Magdalen.’

XII. *From Captain Wragge to Magdalen*

‘North Shingles Villa, Aldborough, Suffolk,

‘July 22nd.

‘My dear Girl,

‘Your letter has charmed and touched me. Your excuses have gone straight to my heart; and your confidence in my humble abilities has followed in the same direction. The pulse of the old militiaman throbs with pride as he thinks of the trust you have placed in him, and vows to deserve it. Don’t be surprised at this genial outburst. All enthusiastic natures must explode occasionally: and *my* form of explosion is—Words.

‘Everything you wanted me to do, is done. The house is taken; the name is found; and I am personally acquainted with Mrs. Lecount. After reading this general statement, you will naturally be interested in possessing your mind next of the accompanying details. Here they are, at your service:

‘The day after leaving you in London, I traced Mr. Noel Vanstone to this curious little sea-side snuggery. One of his father’s innumerable bargains was a house at Aldborough—a rising watering-place, or Mr. Michael Vanstone would not have invested a farthing in it. In this house the despicable litde miser who lived rent free in London, now lives rent free again, on the coast of Suffolk. He is settled in his present abode for the summer and autumn; and you and Mrs. Wragge have only to join me here, to be established five doors away from him in this elegant villa. I have got the whole house for three guineas a week, with the option of remaining through the autumn at the same price. In a fashionable watering-place, such a residence would have been cheap at double the money.

‘Our new name has been chosen with a wary eye to your suggestions. My books—I hope you have not forgotten my Books?—contain, under the heading of *Skins To Jump Into*, a list of individuals retired from this mortal scene, with whose names, families, and circumstances, I am well acquainted. Into some of those Skins I have been compelled to Jump, in the exercise of my profession, at former periods of my career. Others are still in the condition of new dresses, and remain to be tried on. The Skin which will exactly fit us, originally clothed the bodies of a family named Bygrave. I am in Mr. Bygrave’s skin at this moment—and it fits without a wrinkle. If you will oblige me by slipping into Miss Bygrave (Christian name, Susan); and if you will afterwards push Mrs. Wragge—anyhow; head foremost if you like—into Mrs. Bygrave (Christian name, Julia), the transformation will be complete. Permit me to inform you that I am your paternal uncle. My worthy brother was established twenty years ago, in the mahogany and logwood trade at Belize, Honduras. He died in that place; and is buried on the south-west side of the local cemetery, with a neat monument of native wood carved by a self-taught negro artist. Nineteen months afterwards, his widow died of apoplexy at a boarding-house in Cheltenham. She was supposed to be the most corpulent woman in England; and was accommodated on the ground floor of the house in consequence of the difficulty of getting her up and down stairs. You are her only child; you have been under my care since the sad event at Cheltenham; you are twenty-one years old on the second of August next; and, corpulence excepted, you are the living image of your mother. I trouble you with these specimens of my intimate knowledge of our new family Skin, to quiet your mind on the subject of future inquiries. Trust to me and my books to satisfy any amount of inquiry. In the mean time, write down our new name and address, and see how they strike you:—“Mr. Bygrave, Mrs. Bygrave, Miss Bygrave; North Shingles Villa, Aldborough.” Upon my life, it reads remarkably well!

‘The last detail I have to communicate refers to my acquaintance with Mrs. Lecount.

‘We met yesterday, in the grocer’s shop here. Keeping my ears open, I found that Mrs. Lecount wanted a particular kind of tea, which the man had not got, and which he believed could not be procured any nearer than Ipswich. I instantly saw my way to beginning an acquaintance, at the trifling expense of a journey to that flourishing city. “I have business, to-day, in Ipswich,” I said, “and I propose returning to Aldborough (if I can get back in time) this evening. Pray allow me to take your order for the tea, and to bring it back with my own parcels.” Mrs. Lecount politely declined giving me the trouble—I politely insisted on taking it. We fell into conversation. There is no need to trouble you with our talk. The result of it on my mind is—that Mrs. Lecount’s one weak point, if she has such a thing at all, is a taste for science, implanted by her deceased husband, the Professor. I think I see a chance here, of working my way into her good graces, and casting a little needful dust into those handsome black eyes of hers. Acting on this idea, when I purchased the lady’s tea at Ipswich, I also bought on my own account that far-famed pocket manual of knowledge, “Joyce’s Scientific Dialogues.”* Possessing, as I do, a quick memory and boundless confidence in myself, I propose privately inflating my new skin with as much ready-made science as it will hold, and presenting Mr. Bygrave to Mrs. Lecount’s notice in the character of the most highly informed man she has met with since the Professor’s death. The necessity of blindfolding that woman (to use your own admirable expression) is as clear to me as to you. If it is to be done in the way I propose, make your mind easy—Wragge, inflated by Joyce, is the man to do it.

‘You now have my whole budget of news. Am I, or am I not, worthy of your confidence in me? I say nothing of my devouring anxiety to know what your objects really are—that anxiety will be satisfied when we meet. Never yet, my dear girl, did I long to administer a productive pecuniary Squeeze to any human creature, as I long to administer it to Mr. Noel Vanstone. I say no more. *Verbum sap*.* Pardon the pedantry of a Latin quotation, and believe me,

‘Entirely yours,

‘Horatio Wragge.

‘P.S.—I await my instructions, as you requested. You have only to say whether I shall return to London for the purpose of escorting you to this place—or whether I shall wait here to receive you. The house is in perfect order—the weather is charming—and the sea is as smooth as Mrs. Lecount’s apron. She has just passed the window; and we have exchanged bows. A sharp woman, my dear Magdalen—but Joyce and I together, may prove a trifle too much for her.’

XIII. *Extract from the East Suffolk Argus*

‘Aldborough.—We notice with pleasure the arrival of visitors to this healthful and far-famed watering-place, earlier in the season than usual during the present year. *Esto Perpetua** is all we have to say.

‘Visitors’ List.—Arrivals since our last. North Shingles Villa—Mrs. Bygrave; Miss Bygrave.’

The Fourth Scene

*Aldborough, Suffolk**

Wilkie Collins

Chapter I

The most striking spectacle presented to a stranger by the shores of Suffolk, is the extraordinary defencelessness of the land against the encroachments of the sea.

At Aldborough, as elsewhere on this coast, local traditions are, for the most part, traditions which have been literally drowned. The site of the old town, once a populous and thriving port, has almost entirely disappeared in the sea. The German Ocean* has swallowed up streets, marketplaces, jetties, and public walks; and the merciless waters, consummating their work of devastation, closed, no longer than eighty years since, over the salt-master's cottage at Aldborough, now famous in memory only, as the birthplace of the poet Crabbe.*

Thrust back year after year by the advancing waves, the inhabitants have receded, in the present century, to the last morsel of land which is firm enough to be built on—a strip of ground hemmed in between a marsh on one side and the sea on the other. Here—trusting for their future security to certain sandhills which the capricious waves have thrown up to encourage them—the people of Aldborough have boldly established their quaint littie watering-place. The first fragment of their earthly possessions, is a low natural dyke of shingle, surmounted by a public path which runs parallel with the sea. Bordering this path in a broken, uneven line are the villa residences of modem Aldborough—fanciful little houses, standing mostly in their own gardens, and possessing here and there, as horticultural ornaments, staring figure-heads of ships, doing duty for statues among the flowers. Viewed from the low level on which these villas stand, the sea, in certain conditions of the atmosphere, appears to be higher than the land: coasting vessels gliding by, assume gigandc proportions, and look alarmingly near the windows. Intermixed with the houses of the better sort, are buildings of other forms and periods. In one direction, the tiny Gothic town-hall of old Aid-borough—once the centre of the vanished port and borough—now stands fronting the modem villas close on the margin of the sea. At another point, a wooden tower of observation, crowned by the figure-head of a wrecked Russian vessel, rises high above the neighbouring houses; and discloses through its scutde-window, grave men in dark clothing, seated on the topmost story, perpetually on the watch—the pilots of Aldborough looking out from their tower, for ships in want of help. Behind the row of buildings thus curiously intermingled, runs the one straggling street of the town, with its sturdy pilots' cottages, its mouldering marine storehouses, and its composite shops. Towards the northern end, this street is bounded by the one eminence visible over all the marshy flat—a low wooded hill on which the church is built. At its opposite extremity, the street leads to a deserted martello tower, and to the forlorn outlying suburb of Slaughden, between the river Aide and the sea. Such are the main characteristics of this curious little outpost on

the shores of England, as it appears at the present time.

On a hot and cloudy July afternoon, and on the second day which had elapsed since he had written to Magdalen, Captain Wragge sauntered through the gate of North Shingles Villa, to meet the arrival of the coach, which then connected Aldborough with the Eastern Counties Railway. He reached the principal inn as the coach drove up; and was ready at the door to receive Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge, on their leaving the vehicle.

The captain's reception of his wife was not characterized by an instant's unnecessary waste of time. He looked distrustfully at her shoes—raised himself on tiptoe—set her bonnet straight for her with a sharp tug—said, in a loud whisper, 'hold your tongue'—and left her, for the time being, without further notice. His welcome to Magdalen, beginning with the usual flow of words, stopped suddenly in the middle of the first sentence. Captain Wragge's eye was a sharp one; and it instantly showed him something in the look and manner of his old pupil which denoted a serious change.

There was a settled composure on her face which, except when she spoke, made it look as still and cold as marble. Her voice was softer and more equable, her eyes were steadier, her step was slower than of old. When she smiled, the smile came and went suddenly, and showed a little nervous contraction on one side of her mouth, never visible there before. She was perfectly patient with Mrs. Wragge; she treated the captain with a courtesy and consideration entirely new in his experience of her—but she was interested in nothing. The curious little shops in the back street; the high impending sea; the old town-hall on the beach; the pilots, the fishermen, the passing ships—she noticed all these objects as indifferently as if Aldborough had been familiar to her from her infancy. Even when the captain drew up at the garden-gate of North Shingles, and introduced her triumphantly to the new house, she hardly looked at it. The first question she asked related, not to her own residence, but to Noel Vanstone's.

'How near to us does he live?' she inquired, with the only betrayal of emotion which had escaped her yet.

Captain Wragge answered by pointing to the fifth villa from North Shingles, on the Slaughden side of Aldborough. Magdalen suddenly drew back from the garden-gate as he indicated the situation, and walked away by herself to obtain a nearer view of the house.

Captain Wragge looked after her, and shook his head discontentedly.

'May I speak now?' inquired a meek voice behind him, articulating respectfully ten inches above the top of his straw hat.

The captain turned round, and confronted his wife. The more than ordinary bewilderment visible in her face, at once suggested to him that Magdalen had failed to carry out the directions in his letter; and that Mrs. Wragge had arrived at Aldborough, without being properly aware of the total transformation to be accomplished in her identity and her name. The necessity of setting this doubt at rest was too serious to be trifled with; and Captain Wragge instituted the necessary inquiries without a moment's delay.

'Stand straight, and listen to me,' he began. 'I have a question to ask you. Do you know whose Skin you are in at this moment? Do you know that you are dead and buried in London; and that you have risen like a phoenix from the ashes of Mrs. Wragge? No! you evidently don't know it. This is perfectly disgraceful. What is your name?'

'Matilda,' answered Mrs. Wragge, in a state of the densest bewilderment.

'Nothing of the sort!' cried the captain, fiercely. 'How dare you tell me your name's Matilda? Your name is

Julia. Who am I? Hold that basket of sandwiches straight, or I'll pitch it into the sea!—Who am I?'

'I don't know,' said Mrs. Wragge, meekly taking refuge in the negative side of the question this time.

'Sit down!' said her husband, pointing to the low garden wall of North Shingles Villa. 'More to the right! More still! That will do. You don't know?' repeated the captain, sternly confronting his wife, as soon as he had contrived, by seating her, to place her face on a level with his own. 'Don't let me hear you say that a second time. Don't let me have a woman who doesn't know who I am, to operate on my beard to-morrow morning. Look at me! More to the left—more still—that will do. Who am I? I'm Mr. Bygrave—Christian name, Thomas. Who are you? You're Mrs. Bygrave—Christian name, Julia. Who is that young lady who travelled with you from London? That young lady is Miss Bygrave—Christian name, Susan. I'm her clever uncle Tom; and you're her addle-headed aunt Julia. Say it all over to me instantly, like the Catechism! What is your name?'

'Spare my poor head!' pleaded Mrs. Wragge. 'Oh please spare my poor head till I've got the stage-coach out of it!'

'Don't distress her,' said Magdalen, joining them at that moment. 'She will learn it in time. Come into the house.'

Captain Wragge shook his wary head once more. 'We are beginning badly,' he said, with less politeness than usual. 'My wife's stupidity stands in our way already.'

They went into the house. Magdalen was perfectly satisfied with all the captain's arrangements; she accepted the room which he had set apart for her; approved of the woman servant whom he had engaged; presented herself at tea-time the moment she was summoned—but still showed no interest whatever in the new scene around her. Soon after the table was cleared, although the daylight had not yet faded out, Mrs. Wragge's customary drowsiness after fatigue of any kind, overcame her; and she received her husband's orders to leave the room (taking care that she left it 'up at heel'), and to betake herself (strictly in the character of Mrs. Bygrave) to bed. As soon as they were left alone, the captain looked hard at Magdalen, and waited to be spoken to. She said nothing. He ventured next on opening the conversation by a polite inquiry after the state of her health. 'You look fatigued,' he remarked, in his most insinuating manner. 'I am afraid the journey has been too much for you.'

'No,' she replied, looking out listlessly through the window; 'I am not more tired than usual. I am always weary now—weary at going to bed; weary at getting up. If you would like to hear what I have to say to you, to-night—I am willing and ready to say it. Can't we go out? It is very hot here; and the droning of those men's voices is beyond all endurance.' She pointed through the window to a group of boatmen, idling, as only nautical men can idle, against the garden wall. 'Is there no quiet walk in this wretched place?' she asked, impatiently. 'Can't we breathe a little fresh air, and escape being annoyed by strangers?'

'There is perfect solitude within half-an-hour's walk of the house,' replied the ready captain.

'Very well. Come out, then.'

With a weary sigh, she took up her straw bonnet and her fight muslin scarf from the side table upon which she had thrown them on coming in; and carelessly led the way to the door. Captain Wragge followed her to the garden-gate—then stopped, struck by a new idea.

'Excuse me,' he whispered, confidentially. 'In my wife's existing state of ignorance as to who she is, we had better not trust her alone in the house with a new servant. I'll privately turn the key on her, in case she wakes

before we come back. Safe bind, safe find—ˆyou know the proverb!—I will be with you again in a moment.'

He hastened back to the house; and Magdalen seated herself on the garden-wall to await his return.

She had hardly settled herself in that position, when two gentlemen walking together, whose approach along the public path she had not previously noticed, passed close by her.

The dress of one of the two strangers showed him to be a clergyman. His companion's station in life was less easily discernible to ordinary observation. Practised eyes would probably have seen enough in his look, his manner, and his walk, to show that he was a sailor. He was a man in the prime of life; tall, spare, and muscular; his face sunburnt to a deep brown; his black hair just turning grey; his eyes dark, deep, and firm—the eyes of a man with an iron resolution, and a habit of command. He was the nearest of the two to Magdalen, as he and his friend passed the place where she was sitting; and he looked at her with a sudden surprise at her beauty, with an open, hearty, undisguised admiration, which was too evidently sincere, too evidently beyond his own control to be justly resented as insolent—and yet, in her humour at that moment, Magdalen did resent it. She felt the man's resolute black eyes strike through her with an electric suddenness; and frowning at him impatiendy, she turned away her head, and looked back at the house.

The next moment she glanced round again, to see if he had gone on. He had advanced a few yards—had then evidently stopped—and was now in the very act of turning to look at her once more. His companion, the clergyman, noticing that Magdalen appeared to be annoyed, took him familiarly by the arm; and, half in jest, half in earnest, forced him to walk on. The two disappeared round the comer of the next house. As they turned it, the sunburnt sailor twice stopped his companion again, and twice looked back.

'A friend of yours?' inquired Captain Wragge, joining Magdalen at that moment.

'Certainly not,' she replied, 'a perfect stranger. He stared at me in the most impertinent manner. Does he belong to this place?'

'I'll find out in a moment,' said the compliant captain; joining the group of boatmen, and putting his questions right and left, with the easy familiarity which distinguished him. He returned in a few minutes with a complete budget of information. The clergyman was well known as the rector of a place situated some few miles inland. The dark man with him, was his wife's brother, commander of a ship in the merchant service. He was supposed to be staying with his relatives, as their guest for a short time only, preparatory to sailing on another voyage. The clergyman's name was Strickland, and the merchant captain's name was Kirke—and that was all the boatmen knew about either of them.

'It is of no consequence who they are,' said Magdalen, carelessly. 'The man's rudeness merely annoyed me for the moment. Let us have done with him. I have something else to think of—and so have you. Where is the solitary walk you mentioned just now? Which way do we go?'

The captain pointed southward, towards Slaughden, and offered his arm.

Magdalen hesitated before she took it. Her eyes wandered away inquiringly to Noel Vanstone's house. He was out in the garden; pacing backwards and forwards over the little lawn, with his head high in the air, and with Mrs. Lecount demurely in attendance on him, carrying her master's green fan. Seeing this, Magdalen at once took Captain Wragge's right arm, so as to place herself nearest to the garden when they passed it on their walk.

'The eyes of our neighbours are on us; and the least your niece can do is to take your arm,' she said, with a bitter laugh. 'Come! let us go on.'

‘They are looking this way,’ whispered the captain. ‘Shall I introduce you to Mrs. Lecount?’

‘Not to-night,’ she answered. ‘Wait, and hear what I have to say to you first.’

They passed the garden-wall. Captain Wragge took off his hat with a smart flourish, and received a gracious bow from Mrs. Lecount in return. Magdalen saw the housekeeper survey her face, her figure, and her dress, with that reluctant interest, that distrustful curiosity, which women feel in observing each other. As she walked on beyond the house, the sharp voice of Noel Vanstone reached her through the evening stillness. ‘A fine girl, Lecount,’ she heard him say. ‘You know I am a judge of that sort of thing—a fine girl!’

As those words were spoken, Captain Wragge looked round at his companion, in sudden surprise. Her hand was trembling violently on his arm, and her lips were fast closed with an expression of speechless pain.

Slowly and in silence the two walked on, until they reached the southern limit of the houses, and entered on a little wilderness of shingle and withered grass—the desolate end of Aldborough, the lonely beginning of Slaughden.

It was a dull airless evening. Eastward was the gray majesty of the sea, hushed in breathless calm; the horizon line invisibly melting into the monotonous misty sky; the idle ships shadowy and still on the idle water. Southward, the high ridge of the sea dyke, and the grim massive circle of a martello tower, reared high on its mound of grass, closed the view darkly on all that lay beyond. Westward, a lurid streak of sunset glowed red in the dreary heaven—blackened the fringing trees on the far borders of the great inland marsh—and turned its litde gleaming water-pools to pools of blood. Nearer to the eye, the sullen flow of the tidal river Aide, ebbed noiselessly from the muddy banks; and nearer still, lonely and unprosperous by the bleak waterside, lay the lost litde port of Slaughden; with its forlorn wharfs and warehouses of decaying wood, and its few scattered coasting vessels deserted on the oozy river-shore. No fall of waves was heard on the beach; no trickling of waters bubbled audibly from the idle stream. Now and then, the cry of a sea-bird rose from the region of the marsh: and, at intervals, from farm-houses far in the inland waste, the faint winding of horns to call the catde home, travelled mournfully through the evening calm.

Magdalen drew her hand from the captain’s arm, and led the way to the mound of the martello tower. ‘I am weary of walking,’ she said. ‘Let us stop and rest here.’

She seated herself on the slope, and resting on her elbow, mechanically pulled up and scattered from her into the air the tufts of grass growing under her hand. After silently occupying herself in this way for some minutes, she turned suddenly on Captain Wragge. ‘Do I surprise you?’ she asked with a startling abruptness. ‘Do you find me changed?’

The captain’s ready tact warned him that the time had come to be plain with her, and to reserve his flowers of speech for a more appropriate occasion.

‘If you ask the question, I must answer it,’ he replied. ‘Yes: I do find you changed.’

She pulled up another tuft of grass. ‘I suppose you can guess the reason?’ she said.

The captain was wisely silent. He only answered by a bow.

‘I have lost all care for myself,’ she went on tearing faster and faster at the tufts of grass. ‘Saying that, is not saying much, perhaps—but it may help you to understand me. There are things I would have died sooner than do, at one time—things it would have turned me cold to think of. I don’t care now, whether I do them or not. I am nothing to myself; I am no more interested in myself than I am in these handfuls of grass. I suppose I have

lost something. What is it? Heart? Conscience? I don't know. Do you? What nonsense I am talking! Who cares what I have lost? It has gone: and there's an end of it. I suppose my outside is the best side of me—and that's left at any rate. I have not lost my good looks, have I? There! there! never mind answering; don't trouble yourself to pay me compliments. I have been admired enough to-day. First the sailor, and then Mr. Noel Vanstone—enough for any woman's vanity surely! Have I any right to call myself a woman? Perhaps not: I am only a girl in my teens. Oh me, I feel as if I was forty!' She scattered the last fragments of grass to the winds; and, turning her back on the captain, let her head droop till her cheek touched the turf bank. 'It feels soft and friendly,' she said, nestling to it with a hopeless tenderness horrible to see. 'It doesn't cast me off. Mother Earth! The only mother I have left!'

Captain Wragge looked at her in silent surprise. Such experience of humanity as *he* possessed, was powerless to sound to its depths the terrible self-abandonment which had burst its way to the surface in her reckless words—which was now fast hurrying her to actions more reckless still. 'Devilish odd!' he thought to himself uneasily. 'Has the loss of her lover turned her brain?' He considered for a minute longer, and then spoke to her. 'Leave it till to-morrow,' suggested the captain confidentially. 'You are a little tired to-night. No hurry, my dear girl—no hurry.'

She raised her head instantly, and looked round at him, with the same angry resolution, with the same desperate defiance of herself, which he had seen in her face, on the memorable day at York when she had acted before him for the first time. 'I came here to tell you what is in my mind,' she said; 'and, I *will* tell it!' She seated herself upright on the slope; and clasping her hands round her knees, looked out steadily, straight before her, at the slowly darkening view. In that strange position, she waited until she had composed herself; and then addressed the captain, without turning her head to look round at him, in these words:

'When you and I first met,' she began abruptly, 'I tried hard to keep my thoughts to myself. I know enough, by this time, to know that I failed. When I first told you at York that Michael Vanstone had ruined us, I believe you guessed for yourself that I, for one, was determined not to submit to it. Whether you guessed or not, it is so. I left my friends with that determination in my mind; and I feel it in me now, stronger, ten times stronger, than ever.'

'Ten times stronger than ever,' echoed the captain. 'Exactly so—the natural result of firmness of character.'

'No. The natural result of having nothing else to think of. I had something else to think of, before you found me ill in Vauxhall Walk. I have nothing else to think of now. Remember that—if you find me, for the future, always harping on the same string. One question first. Did you guess what I meant to do, on that morning when you showed me the newspaper, and when I read the account of Michael Vanstone's death?'

'Generally,' replied Captain Wragge—'I guessed, generally, that you proposed dipping your hand into his purse, and taking from it (most properly) what was your own. I felt deeply hurt at the time by your not permitting me to assist you. Why is she so reserved with me? (I remarked to myself)—why is she so unreasonably reserved?'

'You shall have no reserve to complain of now,' pursued Magdalen. 'I tell you plainly—if events had not happened as they did, you *would* have assisted me. If Michael Vanstone had not died, I should have gone to Brighton, and have found my way safely to his acquaintance under an assumed name. I had money enough with me to live on respectably for many months together. I would have employed that time, I would have waited a whole year, if necessary, to destroy Mrs. Lecount's influence over him—and I would have ended by getting that influence on my own terms, into my own hands. I had the advantage of years, the advantage of novelty, the advantage of downright desperation, all on my side; and I should have succeeded. Before the year was out—

before half the year was out—you should have seen Mrs. Lecount dismissed by her master; and you should have seen me taken into the house, in her place, as Michael Vanstone's adopted daughter—as the faithful friend who had saved him from an adventuress in his old age. Girls no older than I am have tried deceptions as hopeless in appearance as mine, and have carried them through to the end. I had my story ready; I had my plans all considered; I had the weak point in that old man to attack, in my way, which Mrs. Lecount had found out before me to attack in hers—and I tell you again I should have succeeded.'

'I think you would,' said the captain. 'And what next?'

'Mr. Michael Vanstone would have changed his man of business, next. You would have succeeded to the place and those clever speculations on which he was so fond of venturing, would have cost him the fortunes of which he had robbed my sister and myself. To the last farthing, Captain Wragge—as certainly as you sit there, to the last farthing! A bold conspiracy, a shocking deception—wasn't it? I don't care! Any conspiracy, any deception, is justified to my conscience by the vile law which has left us helpless. You talked of my reserve just now. Have I dropped it at last? Have I spoken out at the eleventh hour?'

The captain laid his hand solemnly on his heart, and launched himself once more on his broadest flow of language.

'You fill me with unavailing regret,' he said. 'If that old man had lived, what a crop I might have reaped from him! What enormous transactions in moral agriculture it might have been my privilege to carry on! *Ars longa*,' said Captain Wragge, pathetically drifting into Latin—'*vita brevis!*[*] Let us drop a tear on the lost opportunities of the past, and try what the present can do to console us. One conclusion is clear to my mind. The experiment you proposed to try with Mr. Michael Vanstone, is totally hopeless, my dear girl, in the case of his son. His son is impervious to all common forms of pecuniary temptation. You may trust my solemn assurance,' continued the captain, speaking with an indignant recollection of the answer to his advertisement in the Times, 'when I inform you that Mr. Noel Vanstone is, emphatically, the meanest of mankind.'

'I can trust my own experience as well,' said Magdalen. 'I have seen him and spoken to him—I know him better than you do. Another disclosure, Captain Wragge, of your private ear! I sent you back certain articles of costume—when they had served the purpose for which I took them to London. That purpose was to find my way to Noel Vanstone, in disguise, and to judge for myself of Mrs. Lecount and her master. I gained my object; and I tell you again, I know the two people in that house yonder whom we have now to deal with, better than you do.'

Captain Wragge expressed the profound astonishment, and asked the innocent questions appropriate to the mental condition of a person taken completely by surprise.

'Well,' he resumed, when Magdalen had briefly answered him; 'and what is the result on your own mind? There must be a result, or we should not be here. You see your way? Of course, my dear girl, you see your way?'

'Yes,' she said quickly. 'I see my way.'

The captain drew a little nearer to her, with eager curiosity expressed in every line of his vagabond face.

'Go on,' he said in an anxious whisper; 'pray go on.'

She looked out thoughtfully into the gathering darkness, without answering, without appearing to have heard him. Her lips closed; and her clasped hands tightened mechanically round her knees.

'There is no disguising the fact,' said Captain Wragge, warily rousing her into speaking to him. 'The son is

harder to deal with than the father———’

‘Not in my way,’ she interposed, suddenly.

‘Indeed!’ said the captain. ‘Well! they say there is a short cut to everything, if we only look long enough to find it. You have looked long enough, I suppose; and the natural result has followed—you have found it.’

‘I have not troubled myself to look; I have found it without looking.’

‘The deuce you have!’ cried Captain Wragge in great perplexity. ‘My dear girl, is my view of your present position leading me altogether astray? As I understand it, here is Mr. Noel Vanstone in possession of your fortune and your sister’s, as his father was—and determined to keep it, as his father was?’

‘Yes.’

‘And here are you—quite helpless to get it by persuasion—quite helpless to get it by law—just as resolute in his case, as you were in his father’s, to take it by stratagem in spite of him?’

‘Just as resolute. Not for the sake of the fortune—mind that! For the sake of the right.’

Just so. And the means of coming at that right which were hard with the father—who was not a miser—are easy with the son, who is?’

‘Perfectly easy.’

‘Write me down an Ass, for the first time in my life!’ cried the captain, at the end of his patience. ‘Hang me if I know what you mean!’

She looked round at him for the first time—looked him straight and steadily in the face.

‘I will tell you what I mean,’ she said. ‘I mean to marry him.’

Captain Wragge started up on his knees; and stopped on them, petrified by astonishment.

‘Remember what I told you,’ said Magdalen, looking away from him again. ‘I have lost all care for myself. I have only one end in life now; and the sooner I reach it—and die—the better. If———’ She stopped; altered her position a little; and pointed with one hand to the fast-ebbing stream beneath her, gleaming dim in the darkening twilight—‘if I had been what I once was, I would have thrown myself into that river sooner that do what I am going to do now. As it is, I trouble myself no longer; I weary my mind with no more schemes. The short way and the vile way, lies before me. I take it, Captain Wragge—and marry him.’

‘Keeping him in total ignorance of who you are?’ said the captain, slowly rising to his feet, and slowly moving round, so as to see her face. ‘Marrying him, as my niece, Miss Bygrave?’

‘As your niece, Miss Bygrave.’

‘And after the marriage———?’ His voice faltered, as he began the question, and he left it unfinished.

‘After the marriage,’ she said, ‘I shall stand in no further need of your assistance.’

The captain stooped, as she gave him that answer—looked close at her—and suddenly drew back, without uttering a word. He walked away some paces, and sat down again doggedly on the grass. If Magdalen could have seen his face, in the dying light, his face would have starded her. For the first time, probably, since his

boyhood, Captain Wragge had changed colour. He was deadly pale.

‘Have you nothing to say to me?’ she asked. ‘Perhaps you are waiting to hear what terms I have to offer? These are my terms. I pay all our expenses here; and when we part, on the day of the marriage, you take a farewell gift away with you of two hundred pounds. Do you promise me your assistance on those conditions?’

‘What am I expected to do?’ he asked, with a furtive look at her, and a sudden distrust in his voice.

‘You are expected to preserve my assumed character and your own,’ she answered; ‘and you are to prevent any inquiries of Mrs. Lecount’s from discovering who I really am. I ask no more. The rest is my responsibility—not yours.’

‘I have nothing to do with what happens—at any time, or in any place—after the marriage?’

‘Nothing whatever.’

‘I may leave you at the church door, if I please?’

‘At the church door—with your fee in your pocket.’

‘Paid from the money in your own possession?’

‘Certainly! How else should I pay it?’

Captain Wragge took off his hat, and passed his handkerchief over his face with an air of relief.

‘Give me a minute to consider it,’ he said.

‘As many minutes as you like,’ she rejoined, reclining on the bank in her former position, and returning to her former occupation of tearing up the tufts of grass and flinging them out into the air.

The captain’s reflections were not complicated by any unnecessary divergences, from the contemplation of his own position to the contemplation of Magdalen’s. Utterly incapable of appreciating the injury done her by Frank’s infamous treachery to his engagement—an injury which had severed her, at one cruel blow, from the aspiration which, delusion though it was, had been the saving aspiration of her life—Captain Wragge accepted the simple fact of her despair, just as he found it; and then looked straight to the consequences of the proposal which she had made to him.

In the prospect *before* the marriage he saw nothing more serious involved than the practice of a deception, in no important degree different—except in the end to be attained by it—from the deceptions which his vagabond life had long since accustomed him to contemplate and to carry out. In the prospect *after* the marriage, he dimly discerned, through the ominous darkness of the future, the lurking phantoms of Terror and Crime, and the black gulfs behind them of Ruin and Death. A man of boundless audacity and resource, within his own mean limits; beyond those limits, the captain was as deferentially submissive to the majesty of the law as the most harmless man in existence; as cautious in looking after his own personal safety, as the veriest coward that ever walked the earth. But one serious question now filled his mind. Could he, on the terms proposed to him, join the conspiracy against Noel Vanstone up to the point of the marriage—and then withdraw from it, without risk of involving himself in the consequences which his experience told him must certainly ensue?

Strange as it may seem, his decision, in this emergency, was mainly influenced by no less a person than Noel Vanstone himself. The captain might have resisted the money-offer which Magdalen had made to him—for the profits of the Entertainment had filled his pockets with more than three times two hundred pounds. But the

prospect of dealing a blow in the dark at the man who had estimated his information and himself at the value of a five-pound note, proved too much for his caution and his self-control. On the small neutral ground of self-importance, the best men and the worst meet on the same terms. Captain Wragge's indignation, when he saw the answer to his advertisement, stooped to no retrospective estimate of his own conduct: he was as deeply offended, as sincerely angry, as if he had made a perfectly honourable proposal, and had been rewarded for it by a personal insult. He had been too full of his own grievance, to keep it out of his first letter to Magdalen. He had more or less forgotten himself, on every subsequent occasion when Noel Vanstone's name was mentioned. And in now finally deciding the course he should take, it is not too much to say, that the motive of money receded, for the first time in his life, into the second place—and the motive of malice carried the day.

'I accept the terms,' said Captain Wragge, getting briskly on his legs again. 'Subject, of course, to the conditions agreed on between us. We part on the wedding-day. I don't ask where you go: you don't ask where I go. From that time forth we are strangers to each other.'

Magdalen rose slowly from the mound. A hopeless depression, a sullen despair, showed itself in her look and manner. She refused the captain's offered hand; and her tones, when she answered him, were so low that he could hardly hear her.

'We understand each other,' she said; 'and we can now go back. You may introduce me to Mrs. Lecount to-morrow.'

'I must ask a few questions first,' said the captain, gravely. 'There are more risks to be run in this matter, and more pitfalls in our way, than you seem to suppose. I must know the whole history of your morning call on Mrs. Lecount, before I put you and that woman on speaking terms with each other.'

'Wait till to-morrow,' she broke out impatiently. 'Don't madden me by talking about it to-night.'

The captain said no more. They turned their faces towards Aldborough, and walked slowly back.

By the time they reached the houses, night had overtaken them. Neither moon nor stars were visible. A faint noiseless breeze, blowing from the land, had come with the darkness. Magdalen paused on the lonely public walk to breathe the air more freely. After a while, she turned her face from the breeze, and looked out towards the sea. The immeasurable silence of the calm waters, lost in the black void of night, was awful. She stood looking into the darkness, as if its mystery had no secrets for her—she advanced towards it slowly, as if it drew her by some hidden attraction into itself.

'I am going down to the sea,' she said to her companion. 'Wait here, and I will come back.'

He lost sight of her in an instant—it was as if the night had swallowed her up. He listened, and counted her footsteps by the crashing of them on the shingle in the deep stillness. They retreated slowly, farther and farther away into the night. Suddenly, the sound of them ceased. Had she paused on her course? or had she reached one of the strips of sand left bare by the ebbing tide?

He waited, and listened anxiously. The time passed and no sound reached him. He still listened with a growing distrust of the darkness. Another moment, and there came a sound from the invisible shore. Far and faint from the beach below, a long cry moaned through the silence. Then, all was still once more.

In sudden alarm, he stepped forward to descend to the beach, and to call to her. Before he could cross the path, footsteps rapidly advancing, caught his ear. He waited an instant—and the figure of a man passed quickly along the walk, between him and the sea. It was too dark to discern anything of the stranger's face; it was only

possible to see that he was a tall man—as tall as that officer in the merchant service, whose name was Kirke.

The figure passed on northward, and was instantly lost to view. Captain Wragge crossed the path; and advancing a few steps down the beach, stopped, and listened again. The crash of footsteps on the shingle caught his ear once more. Slowly, as the sound had left him, that sound now came back. He called, to guide her to him. She came on till he could just see her—a shadow ascending the shingly slope, and growing out of the blackness of the night.

'You alarmed me,' he whispered nervously. 'I was afraid something had happened. I heard you cry out, as if you were in pain.'

'Did you?' she said carelessly. 'I *was* in pain. It doesn't matter—it's over now.'

Her hand mechanically swung something to and fro as she answered him. It was the littie white silk bag, which she had always kept hidden in her bosom up to this time. One of the relics which it held—one of the relics which she had not had the heart to part with before—was gone from its keeping for ever. Alone on a strange shore, she had torn from her the fondest of her virgin memories, the dearest of her virgin hopes. Alone on a strange shore, she had taken the lock of Frank's hair from its once-treasured place, and had cast it away from her to the sea and the night.

Chapter II

The tall man who had passed Captain Wragge in the dark, proceeded rapidly along the public walk, struck off across a little waste patch of ground, and entered the open door of the Aldborough Hotel. The light in the passage, falling full on his face as he passed it, proved the truth of Captain Wragge's surmise, and showed the stranger to be Mr. Kirke, of the merchant service.

Meeting the landlord in the passage, Mr. Kirke nodded to him with the familiarity of an old customer. 'Have you got the paper?' he asked, 'I want to look at the visitors' list.'

'I have got it in my room, sir,' said the landlord, leading the way into a parlour at the back of the house. 'Are there any friends of yours staying here, do you think?'

Without replying, the seaman turned to the list, as soon as the newspaper was placed in his hand, and ran his finger down it, name by name. The finger suddenly stopped at this line: 'Sea-View Cottage; Mr. Noel Vanstone.' Kirke of the merchant service, repeated the name to himself; and put down the paper thoughtfully.

'Have you found anybody you know, captain?' asked the landlord.

'I have found a name I know—a name my father used often to speak of in his time. Is this Mr. Vanstone a family man? Do you know if there is a young lady in the house?'

'I can't say, captain. My wife will be here directly: she is sure to know. It must have been some time ago, if your father knew this Mr. Vanstone?'

'It *was* some time ago. My father knew a subaltern officer of that name, when he was with his regiment in Canada. It would be curious if the person here turned out to be the same man—and if that young lady was his daughter.'

‘Excuse me, captain—but the young lady seems to hang a litde on your mind,’ said the landlord, with a pleasant smile.

Mr. Kirke looked as if the form which his host’s good-humour had just taken, was not quite to his mind. He returned abruptly to the subaltern officer and the regiment in Canada. ‘That poor fellow’s story was as miserable a one as ever I heard,’ he said, looking back again absently at the visitors’ list.

‘Would there be any harm in telling it, sir?’ asked the landlord. ‘Miserable or not—a story’s a story, when you know it to be true.’

Mr. Kirke hesitated. ‘I hardly think I should be doing right to tell it,’ he said. ‘If this man, or any relations of his are still alive, it is not a story they might like strangers to know. All I can tell you is, that my father was the salvation of that young officer, under very dreadful circumstances. They parted in Canada. My father remained with his regiment: the young officer sold out and returned to England—and from that moment they lost sight of each other. It would be curious if this Vanstone here was the same man. It would be curious———’

He suddenly checked himself, just as another reference to ‘the young lady’ was on the point of passing his lips. At the same moment, the landlord’s wife came in; and Mr. Kirke at once transferred his inquiries to the higher authority in the house.

‘Do you know anything of this Mr. Vanstone who is down here on the visitors’ list?’ asked the sailor. ‘Is he an old man?’

‘He’s a miserable little creature to look at,’ replied the landlady—‘but he’s not old, captain!’

‘Then he is not the man I mean. Perhaps, he is the man’s son? Has he got any ladies with him?’

The landlady tossed her head, and pursed up her lips disparagingly.

‘He has a housekeeper with him,’ she said. ‘A middle-aged person—not one of my sort. I dare say I’m wrong—but I don’t like a dressy woman in her station of life.’

Mr. Kirke began to look puzzled. ‘I must have made some mistake about the house,’ he said. ‘Surely there’s a lawn cut octagon-shape at Sea-View Cottage, and a white flag-staff in the middle of the gravel walk?’

‘That’s not Sea-View, sir! It’s North Shingles you’re talking of. Mr. Bygrave’s. His wife and his niece came here, by the coach, to-day. His wife’s tall enought to be put in a show, and the worst dressed woman I ever set eyes on. But Miss Bygrave is worth looking at, if I may venture to say so. She’s the finest girl, to my mind, we’ve had at Aldborough for many a long day. I wonder who they are! Do you know the name, captain?’

‘No,’ said Mr. Kirke, with a shade of disappointment on his dark, weather-beaten face; ‘I never heard the name before.’

After replying in those words, he rose to take his leave. The landlord vainly invited him to drink a parting glass; the landlady vainly pressed him to stay another ten minutes, and try a cup of tea. He only replied that his sister expected him, and that he must return to the parsonage immediately.

On leaving the hotel, Mr. Kirke set his face westward, and walked inland along the high road, as fast as the darkness would let him.

‘Bygrave?’ he thought to himself. ‘Now I know her name, how much am I the wiser for it! If it had been Vanstone, my father’s son might have had a chance of making acquaintance with her.’ He stopped, and looked

back in the direction of Aldborough. ‘What a fool I am!’ he burst out suddenly, striking his stick on the ground. ‘I was forty last birthday.’ He turned, and went on again faster than ever—his head down; his resolute black eyes searching the darkness on the land as they had searched it many a time on the sea, from the deck of his ship.

After more than an hour’s walking, he reached a village, with a primitive little church and parsonage nestled together in a hollow. He entered the house by the back way, and found his sister, the clergyman’s wife, sitting alone over her work in the parlour.

‘Where is your husband, Lizzie?’ he asked, taking a chair in a comer.

‘William has gone out to see a sick person. He had just time enough, before he went,’ she added, with a smile, ‘to tell me about the young lady; and he declares he will never trust himself at Aldborough with you again, until you are a steady married man.’ She stopped; and looked at her brother more attentively than she had looked at him yet. ‘Robert!’ she said, laying aside her work, and suddenly crossing the room to him. ‘You look anxious, you look distressed. William only laughed about your meeting with the young lady. Is it serious? Tell me, what is she like?’

He turned his head away at the question.

She took a stool at his feet, and persisted in looking up at him. ‘Is it serious, Robert?’ she repeated softly.

Kirke’s weatherbeaten face was accustomed to no concealments—it answered for him before he spoke a word. ‘Don’t tell your husband till I am gone,’ he said, with a roughness quite new in his sister’s experience of him. ‘I know I only deserve to be laughed at—but it hurts me, for all that.’

‘Hurts you?’ she repeated, in astonishment.

‘You can’t think me half such a fool, Lizzie, as I think myself,’ pursued Kirke, bitterly. ‘A man at my age ought to know better. I didn’t set eyes on her for as much as a minute altogether; and there I have been, hanging about the place till after nightfall, on the chance of seeing her again—skulking, I should have called it, if I had found one of my men doing what I have been doing myself. I believe I’m bewitched. She’s a mere girl, Lizzie,—I doubt if she’s out of her teens—I’m old enough to be her father. It’s all one; she stops in my mind in spite of me. I’ve had her face looking at me, through the pitch darkness, every step of the way to this house; and it’s looking at me now—as plain as I see yours, and plainer.’

He rose impatiently, and began to walk backwards and forwards in the room. His sister looked after him with surprise, as well as sympathy, expressed in her face. From his boyhood upwards, she had always been accustomed to see him master of himself. Years since, in the failing fortunes of the family, he had been their example and their support. She had heard of him, in the desperate emergencies of a life at sea, when hundreds of his fellow-creatures had looked to his steady self-possession for rescue from close-threatening death—and had not looked in vain. Never, in all her life before, had his sister seen the balance of that calm and equal mind lost, as she saw it lost now.

‘How can you talk so unreasonably about your age and yourself?’ she stud. ‘There is not a woman alive, Robert, who is good enough for you. What is her name?’

‘Bygrave. Do you know it?’

‘No. But I might soon make acquaintance with her. If we only had a litde time before us; if I could only get to Aldborough and see her—but you are going away to morrow; your ship sails at the end of the week.’

‘Thank God for that!’ said Kirke, fervendy.

‘Are you glad to be going away?’ she asked, more and more amazed at him.

‘Right glad, Lizzie, for my own sake. If I ever get to my senses again, I shall find my way back to them on the deck of my ship. This girl has got between me and my thoughts already: she sha’n’t go a step further, and get between me and my duty. I’m determined on that. Fool as I am, I have sense enough left not to trust myself within easy hail of Aldborough to-morrow morning. I’m good for another twenty miles of walking—and I’ll begin my journey back to-night.’

His sister started up, and caught him fast by the arm. ‘Robert!’ she exclaimed; ‘you’re not serious? You don’t mean to leave us on foot, alone in the dark?’

‘It’s only saying good-bye, my dear, the last thing at night, instead of the first thing in the morning,’ he answered, with a smile. ‘Try and make allowances for me, Lizzie. My life has been passed at sea; and I’m not used to having my mind upset in this way. Men ashore are used to it; men ashore can take it easy. I can’t. If I stopped here, I shouldn’t rest. If I waited till to-morrow, I should only be going back to have another look at her. I don’t want to feel more ashamed of myself than I do already. I want to fight my way back to my duty and myself, without stopping to think twice about it. Darkness is nothing to me—I’m used to darkness. I have got the high road to walk on, and I can’t lose my way. Let me go, Lizzie! The only sweetheart I have any business with, at my age, is my ship. Let me get back to her!’

His sister still kept her hold of his arm, and still pleaded with him to stay till the morning. He listened to her with perfect patience and kindness—but she never shook his determination for an instant.

‘What am I to say to William?’ she pleaded. ‘What will he think, when he comes back, and finds you gone?’

‘Tell him I have taken the advice he gave us, in his sermon last Sunday. Say I have turned my back on the world, the flesh, and the devil.’

‘How can you talk so, Robert! And the boys too—you promised not to go without bidding the boys good-bye.’

‘That’s true. I made my little nephews a promise; and I’ll keep it.’ He kicked off his shoes, as he spoke, on the mat outside the door. ‘Light me up-stairs, Lizzie; I’ll bid the two boys good-bye without waking them.’

She saw the uselessness of resisting him any longer; and, taking the candle, went before him up-stairs.

The boys—both young children—were sleeping together in the same bed. The youngest was his uncle’s favourite, and was called by his uncle’s name. He lay peacefully asleep, with a rough little toy ship hugged fast in his arms. Kirke’s eyes softened as he stole on tiptoe to the child’s side, and kissed him with the gentleness of a woman. ‘Poor little man!’ said the sailor, tenderly. ‘He is as fond of his ship as I was at his age. I’ll cut him out a better one when I come back. Will you give me my nephew one of these days, Lizzie, and will you let me make a sailor of him?’

‘O, Robert, if you were only married and happy, as I am!’

‘The time has gone by, my dear. I must make the best of it as I am, with my little nephew there to help me.’

He left the room. His sister’s tears fell fast as she followed him into the parlour. ‘There is something so forlorn and dreadful in your leaving us like this,’ she said. ‘Shall I go to Aldborough to-morrow, Robert, and try if I can get acquainted with her, for your sake?’

‘No!’ he replied. ‘Let her be. If it’s ordered that I am to see that girl again, I *shall* see her. Leave it to the future, and you leave it right.’ He put on his shoes, and took up his hat and stick. ‘I won’t over-walk myself,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘If the coach doesn’t overtake me on the road, I can wait for it where I stop to breakfast. Dry your eyes, my dear; and give me a kiss.’

She was like her brother, in features and complexion; and she had a touch of her brother’s spirit—she dashed away the tears, and took her leave of him bravely.

‘I shall be back in a year’s time,’ said Kirke, falling into his old sailor-like way, at the door. ‘I’ll bring you a China shawl, Lizzie, and a chest of tea for your store-room. Don’t let the boys forget me; and don’t think I’m doing wrong to leave you in this way. I know I am doing right. God bless you and keep you, my dear—and your husband, and your children! Good-bye!’

He stooped, and kissed her. She ran to the door to look after him. A puff of air extinguished the candle—and the black night shut him out from her in an instant.

Three days afterwards the first-class merchantman, Deliverance—Kirke, commander—sailed from London for the China Sea.

Chapter III

The threatening of storm and change passed away with the night. When morning rose over Aldborough, the sun was master in the blue heaven, and the waves were rippling gaily under the summer breeze.

At an hour when no other visitors to the watering-place were yet astir, the indefatigable Wragge appeared at the door of North Shingles Villa, and directed his steps northward, with a neatly-bound copy of Joyce’s Scientific Dialogues in his hand. Arriving at the waste ground beyond the houses, he descended to the beach, and opened his book. The interview of the past night had sharpened his perception of the difficulties to be encountered in the coming enterprise. He was now doubly determined to try the characteristic experiment at which he had hinted in his letter to Magdalen: and to concentrate on himself—in the character of a remarkably well-informed man—the entire interest and attention of the formidable Mrs. Lecount.

Having taken his dose of ready-made science (to use his own expression) the first thing in the morning on an empty stomach, Captain Wragge joined his small family circle at breakfast-time, inflated with information for the day. He observed that Magdalen’s face showed plain signs of a sleepless night. She made no complaint: her manner was composed, and her temper perfectly under control. Mrs. Wragge—refreshed by some thirteen consecutive hours of uninterrupted repose—was in excellent spirits, and up at heel (for a wonder) with both shoes. She brought with her into the room several large sheets of tissue paper, cut crisply into mysterious and many-varying forms, which immediately provoked from her husband the short and sharp question, ‘What have you got there?’

‘Patterns, captain,’ said Mrs. Wragge, in timidly conciliating tones. ‘I went shopping in London, and bought an Oriental Cashmere Robe. It cost a deal of money; and I’m going to try and save, by making it myself. I’ve got my patterns, and my dress-making directions written out as plain as print. I’ll be very tidy, captain; I’ll keep in my own corner, if you’ll please to give me one; and whether my head Buzzes, or whether it don’t I’ll sit straight at my work all the same.’

‘You will do your work,’ said the captain, sternly, ‘when you know who you are, who I am, and who that young lady is—not before. Show me your shoes! Good. Show me your cap! Good. Make the breakfast.’

When breakfast was over, Mrs. Wragge received her orders to retire to an adjoining room, and to wait there until her husband came to release her. As soon as her back was turned, Captain Wragge at once resumed the conversation which had been suspended, by Magdalen’s own desire, on the preceding night. The questions he now put to her, all related to the subject of her visit in disguise to Noel Vanstone’s house. They were the questions of a thoroughly clear-headed man—short, searching, and straight to the point. In less than half-an-hour’s time, he had made himself acquainted with every incident that had happened in Vauxhall Walk.

The conclusions which the captain drew, after gaining his information, were clear and easily stated.

On the adverse side of the question, he expressed his conviction that Mrs. Lecount had certainly detected her visitor to be disguised; that she had never really left the room, though she might have opened and shut the door; and that on both the occasions, therefore, when Magdalen had been betrayed into speaking in her own voice, Mrs. Lecount had heard her. On the favourable side of the question, he was perfectly satisfied that the painted face and eyelids, the wig, and the padded cloak had so effectually concealed Magdalen’s identity, that she might, in her own person, defy the housekeeper’s closest scrutiny, so far as the matter of appearance was concerned. The difficulty of deceiving Mrs. Lecount’s ears, as well as her eyes, was, he readily admitted, not so easily to be disposed of. But looking to the fact that Magdalen, on both the occasions when she had forgotten herself, had spoken in the heat of anger, he was of opinion that her voice had every reasonable chance of escaping detection—if she carefully avoided all outbursts of temper for the future, and spoke in those more composed and ordinary tones, which Mrs. Lecount had not yet heard. Upon the whole, the captain was inclined to pronounce the prospect hopeful, if one serious obstacle were cleared away at the outset—that obstacle being nothing less than the presence on the scene of action of Mrs. Wragge.

To Magdalen’s surprise, when the course of her narrative brought her to the story of the ghost, Captain Wragge listened with the air of a man who was more annoyed than amused by what he heard. When she had done, he plainly told her that her unlucky meeting on the stairs of the lodging-house with Mrs. Wragge was, in his opinion, the most serious of all the accidents that had happened in Vauxhall Walk.

‘I can deal with the difficulty of my wife’s stupidity,’ he said, ‘as I have often dealt with it before. I can hammer her new identity *into* her head, but I can’t hammer the ghost *out* of it. We have no security that the woman in the grey cloak and poke bonnet may not come back to her recollection at the most critical time, and under the most awkward circumstances. In plain English, my dear girl, Mrs. Wragge is a pitfall under our feet at every step we take.’

‘If we are aware of the pitfall,’ said Magdalen, ‘we can take our measures for avoiding it. What do you propose?’

‘I propose,’ replied the captain, ‘the temporary removal of Mrs. Wragge. Speaking purely in a pecuniary point of view, I can’t afford a total separation from her. You have often read of very poor people being suddenly enriched by legacies reaching them from remote and unexpected quarters? Mrs. Wragge’s case, when I married her, was one of these. An elderly female relative shared the favours of fortune, on that occasion, with my wife; and if I only keep up domestic appearances, I happen to know that Mrs. Wragge will prove a second time profitable to me, on that elderly relative’s death. But for this circumstance, I should probably long since have transferred my wife to the care of society at large—in the agreeable conviction that if I didn’t support her, somebody else would. Although I can’t afford to take this course, I see no objection to having her comfortably boarded and lodged out of our way, for the time being—say, at a retired farm-house, in the character of a lady in

infirm mental health. *You* would find the expense trifling; / should find the relief unutterable. What do you say? Shall I pack her up at once, and take her away by the next coach?'

'No!' replied Magdalen, firmly. 'The poor creature's life is hard enough already; I won't help to make it harder. She was affectionately and truly kind to me when I was ill—and I won't allow her to be shut up among strangers while I can help it. The risk of keeping her here is only one risk more. I will face it, Captain Wragge—if you won't.'

'Think twice,' said the captain, gravely, 'before you decide on keeping Mrs. Wragge.'

'Once is enough,' rejoined Magdalen. 'I won't have her sent away.'

'Very good,' said the captain, resignedly. I never interfere with questions of sentiment. But I have a word to say, on my own behalf. If my services are to be of any use to you, I can't have my hands tied at starting. This is serious. I won't trust my wife and Mrs. Lecount together. I'm afraid, if you're not—and I make it a condition that, if Mrs. Wragge stops here, she keeps her room. If you think her health requires it, you can take her for a walk early in the morning, or late in the evening—but you must never trust her out with the servant, and never trust her out by herself. I put the matter plainly, it is too important to be trifled with. What do you say—yes, or no?'

'I say, yes,' replied Magdalen, after a moment's consideration. 'On the understanding that I am to take her out walking as you propose.'

Captain Wragge bowed, and recovered his suavity of manner. 'What are our plans?' he inquired. 'Shall we start our enterprise this afternoon? Are you ready for your introduction to Mrs. Lecount and her master?'

'Quite ready.'

'Good, again. We will meet them on the Parade, at their usual hour for going out—two o'clock. It is not twelve yet. I have two hours before me—just time enough to fit my wife into her new Skin. The process is absolutely necessary, to prevent her compromising us with the servant. Don't be afraid about the results; Mrs. Wragge has had a copious selection of assumed names hammered into her head in the course of her matrimonial career. It is merely a question of hammering hard enough—nothing more. I think we have settled everything now. Is there anything I can do before two o'clock? Have you any employment for the morning?'

'No,' said Magdalen. 'I shall go back to my own room, and try to rest.'

'You had a disturbed night, I am afraid?' said the captain, politely opening the door for her.

'I fell asleep once or twice,' she answered, carelessly. 'I suppose my nerves are a little shaken. The bold black eyes of that man who stared so rudely at me yesterday evening, seemed to be looking at me again in my dreams. If we see him to-day, and if he annoys me any more, I must trouble you to speak to him. We will meet here again at two o'clock. Don't be hard with Mrs. Wragge; teach her what she must learn as tenderly as you can.'

With those words she left him, and went up-stairs.

She lay down on her bed, with a heavy sigh, and tried to sleep. It was useless. The dull weariness of herself which now possessed her, was not the weariness which finds its remedy in repose. She rose again, and sat by the window, looking out lisdessly over the sea.

A weaker nature than hers would not have felt the shock of Frank's desertion as she had felt it—as she was

feeling it still. A weaker nature would have found refuge in indignation and comfort in tears. The passionate strength of Magdalen's love clung desperately to the sinking wreck of its own delusion—clung, until she tore herself from it, by main force of will. All that her native pride, her keen sense of wrong could do, was to shame her from dwelling on the thoughts which still caught their breath of life from the undying devotion of the past; which still perversely ascribed Frank's heartless farewell to any cause but the inborn baseness of the man who had written it. The woman never lived yet who could cast a true love out of her heart, because the object of that love was unworthy of her. All she can do is to struggle against it in secret—to sink in the contest, if she is weak; to win her way through it, if she is strong, by a process of selflaceration, which is of all moral remedies applied to a woman's nature, the most dangerous and the most desperate; of all moral changes the change that is surest to mark her for life. Magdalen's strong nature had sustained her through the struggle; and the issue of it had left her—what she now was.

After sitdng by the window for nearly an hour—her eyes looking mechanically at the view; her mind empty of all impressions, and conscious of no thoughts—she shook off the strange waking stupor that possessed her, and rose to prepare herself for the serious business of the day.

She went to the wardrobe, and took down from the pegs two bright, delicate muslin dresses, which had been made for summer wear at Combe-Raven, a year since, and which had been of too litde value to be worth selling when she parted with her other possessions. After placing these dresses side by side on the bed, she looked into the wardrobe once more. It only contained one other summer dress—the plain alpaca gown which she had worn during her memorable interview with Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount. This she left in its place; resolving not to wear it, less from any dread that the housekeeper might recognize a pattern too quiet to be noticed, and too common to be remembered, than from the conviction that it was neither gay enough nor becoming enough for her purpose. After taking a plain white muslin scarf, a pair of light grey kid gloves, and a garden hat of Tuscan straw, from the drawers of the wardrobe, she locked it, and put the key carefully in her pocket.

Instead of at once proceeding to dress herself, she sat idly looking at the two muslin gowns; careless which she wore, and yet inconsistently hesitating which to choose. 'What does it matter!' she said to herself with a reckless laugh; 'I am equally worthless in my own estimation, whichever I put on.' She shuddered, as if the sound of her own laughter had startled her; and abruptly caught up the dress which lay nearest to her hand. Its colours were blue and white—the shade of blue which best suited her fair complexion. She hurriedly put on the gown, without going near her looking-glass. For the first time in her life, she shrank from meeting the reflection of herself—except for a moment, when she arranged her hair under her garden-hat, leaving the glass again immediately. She drew her scarf over her shoulders, and fitted on her gloves, with her back to the toilet-table. 'Shall I paint?' she asked herself, feeling instinctively that she was turning pale. 'The rouge is still left in my box. It can't make my face more false than it is already.' She looked round towards the glass, and again turned away from it. 'No!' she said. 'I have Mrs. Lecount to face, as well as her master. No paint.' After consulting her watch, she left the room, and went down stairs again. It wanted ten minutes only of two o'clock.

Captain Wragge was waiting for her in the parlour—respectable in a frock-coat, a stiff summer cravat, and a high white hat; specklessly and cheerfully rural, in a buff waistcoat, grey trousers, and gaiters to match. His collars were higher than ever, and he carried a bran-new camp-stool in his hand. Any tradesman in England who had seen him at that moment, would have trusted him on the spot.

'Charming!' said the captain, paternally surveying Magdalen when she entered the room. 'So fresh and cool! A litde too pale, my dear, and a great deal too serious. Otherwise perfect. Try if you can smile.'

'When the time comes for smiling,' said Magdalen, bitterly, 'trust my dramatic training for any change of face that may be necessary. Where is Mrs. Wragge?'

‘Mrs. Wragge has learnt her lesson,’ replied the captain, ‘and is rewarded by my permission to sit at work in her own room. I sanction her new fancy for dressmaking, because it is sure to absorb all her attention, and to keep her at home. There is no fear of her finishing the Oriental Robe in a hurry—for there is no mistake in the process of making it which she is not certain to commit. She will sit incubating her gown—pardon the expression—like a hen over an addled egg. I assure you her new whim relieves me. Nothing could be more convenient under existing circumstances.’

He strutted away to the window—looked out—and beckoned to Magdalen to join him. ‘There they are!’ he said, and pointed to the Parade.

Noel Vanstone slowly walked by, as she looked, dressed in a complete suit of old-fashioned nankeen.* It was apparently one of the days when the state of his health was at the worst. He leaned on Mrs. Lecount’s arm, and was protected from the sun by a light umbrella which she held over him. The housekeeper—dressed to perfection, as usual, in a quiet, lavender-coloured summer gown, a black mantilla, an unassuming straw bonnet, and a crisp blue veil—escorted her invalid master with the tenderest attention; sometimes, directing his notice respectfully to the various objects of the sea view; sometimes, bending her head in graceful acknowledgment of the courtesy of passing strangers on the Parade, who stepped aside to let the invalid pass by. She produced a visible effect among the idlers on the beach. They looked after her, with unanimous interest; and exchanged confidential nods of approval, which said as plainly as words could have expressed it:—‘A very domestic person! a truly superior woman!’

Captain Wragge’s parti-coloured eyes followed Mrs. Lecount with a steady, distrustful attention. ‘Tough work for us *there,’* he whispered in Magdalen’s ear; ‘tougher work than you think, before we turn that woman out of her place.’

‘Wait,’ said Magdalen, quietly. ‘Wait, and see.’

She walked to the door. The captain followed her without making any further remark. ‘I’ll wait till you’re married,’ he thought to himself—‘not a moment longer, offer me what you may.’

At the house door, Magdalen addressed him again.

‘We will go that way,’ she said, pointing southward—‘then turn, and meet them as they come back.’

Captain Wragge signified his approval of the arrangement, and followed Magdalen to the garden gate. As she opened it to pass through, her attention was attracted by a lady, with a nursery-maid and two little boys behind her, loitering on the path outside the garden wall. The lady started, looked eagerly, and smiled to herself, as Magdalen came out. Curiosity had got the better of Kirke’s sister—and she had come to Aldborough for the express purpose of seeing Miss Bygrave.

Something in the shape of the lady’s face, something in the expression of her dark eyes, reminded Magdalen of the merchant-captain, whose uncontrolled admiration had annoyed her on the previous evening. She instantly returned the stranger’s Scrutiny by a frowning, ungracious look. The lady coloured, paid the look back with interest, and slowly walked on.

‘A hard, bold, bad girl!’ thought Kirke’s sister. ‘What could Robert be thinking of to admire her? I am almost glad he is gone. I hope and trust he will never set eyes on Miss Bygrave again.’

‘What boors the people are here!’ said Magdalen to Captain Wragge. ‘That woman was even ruder than the man last night. She is like him in the face. I wonder who she is?’

‘I’ll find out direcdy,’ said the captain. ‘We can’t be too cautious about strangers.’ He at once appealed to his friends, the boatmen. They were close at hand; and Magdalen heard the questions and answers plainly.

‘How are you all, this morning?’ said Captain Wragge, in his easy jocular way. ‘And how’s the wind? Nor’-west and by west, is it? Very good. Who is that lady?’

‘That’s Mrs. Strickland, sir.’

‘Ay! ay! The clergyman’s wife and the captain’s sister. Where’s the captain to-day?’

‘On his way to London, I should think, sir. His ship sails for China, at the end of the week.’

China! As that one word passed the man’s lips, a pang of the old sorrow struck Magdalen to the heart. Stranger as he was, she began to hate the bare mention of the merchant-captain’s name. He had troubled her dreams of the past night—and now, when she was most desperately and recklessly bent on forgetting her old home-existence, he had been indirectly the cause of recalling her mind to Frank.

‘Come!’ she said angrily to her companion. ‘What do we care about the man or his ship? Come away.’

‘By all means,’ said Captain Wragge. ‘As long as we don’t find friends of the Bygraves, what do we care about anybody?’

They walked on, southwards, for ten minutes or more—then turned and walked back again to meet Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount.

Chapter IV

Captain Wragge and Magdalen retraced their steps until they were again within view of North Shingles Villa, before any signs appeared of Mrs. Lecount and her master. At that point, the housekeeper’s lavender-coloured dress, the umbrella, and the feeble litde figure in nankeen walking under it, became visible in the distance. The captain slackened his pace immediately; and issued his directions to Magdalen for her conduct at the coming interview, in these words:

‘Don’t forget your smile,’ he said. ‘In all other respects you will do. The walk has improved your complexion, and the hat becomes you. Look Mrs. Lecount steadily in the face; show no embarrassment when you speak; and if Mr. Noel Vanstone pays you pointed attention, don’t take too much notice of him while his housekeeper’s eye is on you. Mind one thing! I have been at Joyce’s Scientific Dialogues all the morning; and I am quite serious in meaning to give Mrs. Lecount the full benefit of my studies. If I can’t contrive to divert her attention from you and her master, I won’t give sixpence for our chance of success. Small-talk won’t succeed with that woman; compliments won’t succeed; jokes won’t succeed—ready-made science may recall the deceased Professor, and ready-made science may do. We must establish a code of signals to let you know what I am about. Observe this camp-stool. When I shift it from my left hand to my right, I am talking Joyce. When I shift it from my right hand to my left, I am talking Wragge. In the first case, don’t interrupt me—I am leading up to my point. In the second case, say anything you like; my remarks are not of the slightest consequence. Would you like a rehearsal? Are you sure you understand? Very good—take my arm, and look happy. Steady! here they are.’

The meeting took place nearly midway between Sea View Cottage and North Shingles. Captain Wragge took off

his tall white hat, and opened the interview immediately on the friendliest terms.

‘Good morning, Mrs. Lecount,’ he said, with the frank and cheerful politeness of a naturally sociable man. ‘Good morning, Mr. Vanstone; I am sorry to see you suffering to-day. Mrs. Lecount, permit me to introduce my niece—my niece, Miss Bygrave. My dear girl, this is Mr. Noel Vanstone, our neighbour at Sea View Cottage. We must positively be sociable at Aldborough, Mrs. Lecount. There is only one walk in the place (as my niece remarked to me just now, Mr. Vanstone); and on that walk we must all meet every time we go out. And why not? Are we formal people on either side? Nothing of the sort—we are just the reverse. You possess the continental facility of manner, Mr. Vanstone—I match you, with the blunt cordiality of an old-fashioned Englishman—the ladies mingle together in harmonious variety, like flowers on the same bed—and the result is a mutual interest in making our sojourn at the sea-side agreeable to each other. Pardon my flow of spirits; pardon my feeling so cheerful and so young. The Iodine in the sea-air, Mrs. Lecount—the notorious effect of the Iodine in the sea-air!’

‘You arrived yesterday, Miss Bygrave, did you not?’ said the housekeeper, as soon as the captain’s deluge of language had come to an end.

She addressed those words to Magdalen with a gende motherly interest in her youth and beauty, chastened by the deferential amiability which became her situation in Noel Vanstone’s household. Not the faintest token of suspicion or surprise betrayed itself in her face, her voice, or her manner, while she and Madgalen now looked at each other. It was plain at the outset that the true face and figure which she now saw, recalled nothing to her mind of the false face and figure which she had seen in Vauxhall Walk. The disguise had evidently been complete enough even to baffle the penetration of Mrs. Lecount.

‘My aunt and I came here yesterday evening,’ said Magdalen. ‘We found the latter part of the journey very fatiguing. I dare say you found it so too?’

She designedly made her answer longer than was necessary, for the purpose of discovering, at the earliest opportunity, the effect which the sound of her voice produced on Mrs. Lecount.

The housekeeper’s thin lips maintained their motherly smile; the housekeeper’s amiable manner lost none of its modest deference—but the expression of her eyes suddenly changed, from a look of attention to a look of inquiry. Magdalen quietly said a few words more; and then waited again for results. The change spread gradually all over Mrs. Lecount’s face; the motherly smile died away; and the amiable manner betrayed a slight touch of restraint. Still, no signs of positive recognition appeared; the housekeeper’s expression remained what it had been from the first—an expression of inquiry, and nothing more.

‘You complained of fatigue, sir, a few minutes since,’ she said, dropping all further conversation with Magdalen, and addressing her master. ‘Will you go in-doors and rest?’

The proprietor of Sea View Cottage had hitherto confined himself to bowing, simpering, and admiring Magdalen through his half-closed eyelids. There was no mistaking the sudden flutter and agitation in his manner, and the heightened colour in his wizen little face. Even the reptile temperament of Noel Vanstone warmed under the influence of the sex: he had an undeniably appreciative eye for a handsome woman, and Magdalen’s grace and beauty were not thrown away on him.

‘Will you go in-doors, sir, and rest?’ asked the housekeeper, repeating her question.

‘Not yet, Lecount,’ said her master. ‘I fancy I feel stronger; I fancy I can go on a little.’ He turned simpering to Magdalen, and added in a lower tone, ‘I have found a new interest in my walk, Miss Bygrave. Don’t desert us,

or you will take the interest away with you.'

He smiled and smirked in the highest approval of the ingenuity of his own compliment—from which Captain Wragge dexterously diverted the housekeeper's attention, by ranging himself on her side of the path and speaking to her at the same moment. They all four walked on slowly. Mrs. Lecount said nothing more. She kept fast hold of her master's arm, and looked across him at Magdalen with the dangerous expression of inquiry more marked than ever in her handsome black eyes. That look was not lost on the wary Wragge. He shifted his indicative camp-stool from the left hand to the right, and opened his scientific batteries on the spot.

'A busy scene, Mrs. Lecount,' said the captain, politely waving his camp-stool over the sea and the passing ships. 'The greatness of England, ma'am—the true greatness of England. Pray observe how heavily some of those vessels are laden! I am often inclined to wonder whether the British sailor is at all aware, when he has got his cargo on board, of the Hydrostatic importance of the operation that he has performed. If I were suddenly transported to the deck of one of those ships (which Heaven forbid, for I suffer at sea); and if I said to a member of the crew, 'Jack! you have done wonders; you have grasped the Theory of Floating Vessels'—how the gallant fellow would stare! And yet, on that theory Jack's life depends. If he loads his vessel one-thirtieth part more than he ought, what happens? He sails past Aldborough, I grant you, in safety. He enters the Thames, I grant you again, in safety. He gets on into the fresh water, as far, let us say, as Greenwich; and—down he goes! Down, ma'am, to the bottom of the river, as a matter of scientific certainty!'

Here he paused; and left Mrs. Lecount no polite alternative but to request an explanation.

'With infinite pleasure, ma'am,' said the captain, drowning in the deepest notes of his voice the feeble treble in which Noel Vanstone paid his compliments to Magdalen. 'We will start, if you please, with a first principle. All bodies whatever that float on the surface of the water, displace as much fluid as is equal in weight to the weight of the bodies. Good! We have got our first principle. What do we deduce from it? Manifestly this: That in order to keep a vessel above water, it is necessary to take care that the vessel and its cargo shall be of less weight than the weight of a quantity of water—pray follow me here!—of a quantity of water equal in bulk to that part of the vessel which it will be safe to immerse in the water. Now, ma'am, salt water is specifically thirty times heavier than fresh or river water; and a vessel in the German Ocean will not sink so deep as a vessel in the Thames. Consequendy, when we load our ship with a view to the London market, we have (Hydrostatically speaking) three alternatives. Either we load with one-thirtieth part less than we can carry at sea; or we take one-thirtieth part less than we can carry at sea; or we take one-thirtieth part out at the mouth of the river; or we do neither the one nor the other, and, as I have already had the honour of remarking—down we go! Such,' said the captain, shifting the camp-stool back again from his right hand to his left, in token that Joyce was done with for the time being; 'such, my dear madam, is the Theory of Floating Vessels. Permit me to add, in conclusion—you are heartily welcome to it.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Mrs. Lecount. 'You have unintentionally saddened me, but the information I have received is not the less precious on that account. It is long, long ago, Mr. Bygrave, since I have heard myself addressed in the language of science. My dear husband made me his companion—my dear husband improved my mind as you have been trying to improve it. Nobody has taken pains with my intellect since. Many thanks, sir. Your kind consideration for me is not thrown away.'

She sighed with a plaintive humility; and privately opened her ears to the conversation on the other side of her.

A minute earlier, she would have heard her master expressing himself in the most flattering terms on the subject of Miss Bygrave's appearance in her sea-side costume. But Magdalen had seen Captain Wragge's signal with the camp-stool, and had at once diverted Noel Vanstone to the topic of himself and his possessions, by a neatly-

timed question about his house at Aldborough.

‘I don’t wish to alarm you, Miss Bygrave,’ were the first words of Noel Vanstone’s which caught Mrs. Lecount’s attention—‘but there is only one safe house in Aldborough—and that house is Mine. The sea may destroy all the other houses—it can’t destroy Mine. My father took care of that; my father was a remarkable man. He had My house built on piles. I have reason to believe they are the strongest piles in England. Nothing can possibly knock them down—I don’t care what the sea does—nothing can possibly knock them down.’

‘Then if the sea invades us,’ said Magdalen, ‘we must all run for refuge to you.’

Noel Vanstone saw his way to another compliment; and, at the same moment, the wary captain saw his way to another burst of science.

‘I could almost wish the invasion might happen,’ murmured one of the gentlemen, ‘to give me the happiness of offering the refuge.’

‘I could almost swear the wind had shifted again!’ exclaimed the other. ‘Where is a man I can ask? Oh, there he is. Boatman! How’s the wind, now? Nor’-west and by west still—hey? And south-east and by south yesterday evening—ha? Is there anything more remarkable, Mrs. Lecount, than the variableness of the wind in this climate?’ proceeded the captain, shifting the camp-stool to the scientific side of him. ‘Is there any natural phenomenon more bewildering to the scientific inquirer? You will tell me that the electric fluid which abounds in the air is the principal cause of this variableness. You will remind me of the experiment of that illustrious philosopher who measured the velocity of a great storm by a flight of small feathers. My dear madam, I grant all your propositions———’

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount; ‘you kindly attribute to me a knowledge that I don’t possess. Propositions, I regret to say, are quite beyond me.’

‘Don’t misunderstand me, ma’am,’ continued the captain, politely unconscious of the interruption. ‘My remarks apply to the temperate zone only. Place me on the coasts beyond the tropics—place me where the wind blows towards the shore in the daytime, and towards the sea by night—and I instantly advance towards conclusive experiments. For example, I know that the heat of the sun during the day, rarefies the air over the land, and so causes the wind. You challenge me to prove it. I escort you down the kitchen-stairs (with your kind permission); I take my largest pie-dish out of the cook’s hands; I fill it with cold water. Good! that dish of cold water represents the ocean. I next provide myself with one of our most precious domestic conveniences—a hot-water plate—I fill it with hot water, and I put it in the middle of the pie-dish. Good again! the hot-water plate represents the land rarefying the air over it. Bear that in mind, and give me a lighted candle. I hold my lighted candle over the cold water, and blow it out. The smoke immediately moves from the dish to the plate. Before you have time to express your satisfaction, I light the candle once more, and reverse the whole proceeding. I fill the pie-dish with hot water, and the plate with cold; I blow the candle out again, and the smoke moves this time from the plate to the dish. The smell is disagreeable—but the experiment is conclusive.’

He shifted the camp-stool back again, and looked at Mrs. Lecount with his ingratiating smile. ‘You don’t find me long-winded, ma’am—do you?’ he said, in his easy, cheerful way, just as the housekeeper was privately opening her ears once more to the conversation on the other side of her.

‘I am amazed, sir, by the range of your information,’ replied Mrs. Lecount, observing the captain with some perplexity—-but, thus far, with no distrust. She thought him eccentric, even for an Englishman, and possibly a little vain of his knowledge. But he had at least paid her the implied compliment of addressing that knowledge to herself; and she felt it the more sensibly, from having hitherto found her scientific sympathies with her

deceased husband, treated with no great respect by the people with whom she came in contact. ‘Have you extended your inquiries, sir,’ she proceeded, after a momentary hesitation, ‘to my late husband’s branch of science? I merely ask, Mr. Bygrave, because (though I am only a woman) I think I might exchange ideas with you, on the subject of the reptile creation.’

Captain Wragge was far too sharp to risk his ready-made science on the enemy’s ground. The old militiaman shook his wary head.

‘Too vast a subject, ma’am,’ he said, ‘for a smatterer like me. The life and labours of such a philosopher as your husband, Mrs. Lecount, warn men of my intellectual calibre not to measure themselves with a giant. May I inquire,’ proceeded the captain, softly smoothing the way for future intercourse with Sea View Cottage, ‘whether you possess any scientific memorials of the late Professor?’

‘I possess his Tank, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount, modestly casting her eyes on the ground; ‘and one of his Subjects—a litde foreign Toad.’

‘His Tank!’ exclaimed the captain, in tones of mournful interest. ‘And his Toad! Pardon my blunt way of speaking my mind, ma’am. You possess an object of public interest; and, as one of the public, I acknowledge my curiosity to see it.’

Mrs. Lecount’s smooth cheeks coloured with pleasure. The one assailable place in that cold and secret nature, was the place occupied by the memory of the Professor. Her pride in his scientific achievements, and her mortification at finding them but little known out of his own country, were genuine feelings. Never had Captain Wragge burnt his adulterated incense on the flimsy altar of human vanity to better purpose than he was burning it now.

‘You are very good, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘In honouring my husband’s memory, you honour *me*. But though you kindly treat me on a footing of equality, I must not forget that I fill a domestic situation. I shall feel it a privilege to show you my relics, if you will allow me to ask my master’s permission first.’

She turned to Noel Vanstone; her perfectly sincere intention of making the proposed request, mingling—in that strange complexity of motives which is found so much oftener in a woman’s mind than in a man’s—with her jealous distrust of the impression which Magdalen had produced on her master.

‘May I make a request, sir?’ asked Mrs. Lecount, after waiting a moment to catch any fragments of tenderly-personal talk that might reach her, and after being again neatly baffled by Magdalen—thanks to the camp-stool. ‘Mr. Bygrave is one of the few persons in England who appreciate my husband’s scientific labours. He honours me by wishing to see my little world of reptiles. May I show it to him?’

‘By all means, Lecount,’ said Noel Vanstone, graciously. ‘You are an excellent creature, and I like to oblige you. Lecount’s Tank, Mr. Bygrave, is the only Tank in England—Lecount’s Toad, is the oldest Toad in the world. Will you come and drink tea at seven o’clock to-night? And will you prevail on Miss Bygrave to accompany you? I want her to see my house. I don’t think she has any idea what a strong house it is. Come and survey my premises, Miss Bygrave. You shall have a stick, and rap on the walls; you shall go upstairs and stamp on the floors—and then you shall hear what it all cost.’ His eyes wrinkled up cunningly at the corners, and he slipped another tender speech into Magdalen’s ear, under cover of the all-predominating voice in which Captain Wragge thanked him for the invitation. ‘Come punctually at seven,’ he whispered, ‘and pray wear that charming hat!’

Mrs. Lecount’s lips closed ominously. She set down the captain’s niece as a very serious drawback to the

intellectual luxury of the captain's society.

'You are fatiguing yourself, sir,' she said to her master. 'This is one of your bad days. Let me recommend you to be careful; let me beg you to walk back.'

Having carried his point by inviting the new acquaintances to tea, Noel Vanstone proved to be unexpectedly docile. He acknowledged that he was a litde fatigued, and turned back at once in obedience to the housekeeper's advice.

'Take my arm, sir—take my arm on the other side,' said Captain Wragge, as they turned to retrace their steps. His parti-coloured eyes looked significantly at Magdalen while he spoke, and warned her not to stretch Mrs. Lecount's endurance too far at starting. She instantly understood him; and, in spite of Noel Vanstone's reiterated assertions that he stood in no need of the captain's arm, placed herself at once by the housekeeper's side. Mrs. Lecount recovered her good humour, and opened another conversation with Magdalen, by making the one inquiry of all others which, under existing circumstances, was the hardest to answer.

'I presume Mrs. Bygrave is too tired, after her journey, to come out today?' said Mrs. Lecount. 'Shall we have the pleasure of seeing her tomorrow?'

'Probably not,' replied Magdalen. 'My aunt is in delicate health.'

'A complicated case, my dear madam,' added the captain; conscious that Mrs. Wragge's personal appearance (if she happened to be seen by accident) would offer the flattest of all possible contradictions to what Magdalen had just said of her. 'There is some remote nervous mischief which doesn't express itself externally. You would think my wife the picture of health, if you looked at her—and yet, so delusive are appearances, I am obliged to forbid her all excitement. She sees no society—our medical attendant, I regret to say, absolutely prohibits it.'

'Very sad,' said Mrs. Lecount. 'The poor lady must often feel lonely, sir, when you and your niece are away from her?'

'No,' replied the captain. 'Mrs. Bygrave is a naturally domestic woman. When she is able to employ herself, she finds unlimited resources in her needle and thread.' Having reached this stage of the explanation—and having purposely skirted, as it were, round the confines of truth, in the event of the housekeeper's curiosity leading her to make any private inquiries on the subject of Mrs. Wragge—the captain wisely checked his fluent tongue from carrying him into any further details. 'I have great hope from the air of this place,' he remarked in conclusion. 'The Iodine, as I have already observed, does wonders.'

Mrs. Lecount acknowledged the virtues of Iodine in the briefest possible form of words, and withdrew into the innermost sanctuary of her own thoughts. 'Some mystery here,' said the housekeeper to herself. 'A lady who looks the picture of health; a lady who suffers from a complicated nervous malady; and a lady whose hand is steady enough to use her needle and thread—is a living mass of contradictions I don't quite understand. Do you make a long stay at Aldborough, sir?' she added aloud; her eyes resting for a moment, in steady scrutiny, on the captain's face.

'It all depends, my dear madam, on Mrs. Bygrave. I trust we shall stay through the autumn. You are settled at Sea View Cottage, I presume, for the season?'

'You must ask my master, sir. It is for him to decide, not for me.'

The answer was an unfortunate one. Noel Vanstone had been secretly annoyed by the change in the walking arrangements, which had separated him from Magdalen. He attributed that change to the meddling influence of

Mrs. Lecount, and he now took the earliest opportunity of resenting it on the spot.

'I have nothing to do with our stay at Aldborough,' he broke out peevishly. 'You know as well as I do, Lecount, it all depends on *you*. Mrs. Lecount has a brother in Switzerland,' he went on, addressing himself to the captain —'a brother who is seriously ill. If he gets worse, she will have to go there and see him. I can't accompany her, and I can't be left in the house by myself. I shall have to break up my establishment at Aldborough, and stay with some friends. It all depends on you, Lecount—or on your brother, which comes to the same thing. If it depended on *me*,' continued Mr. Noel Vanstone, looking pointedly at Magdalen across the housekeeper, 'I should stay at Aldborough all through the autumn with the greatest pleasure. With the greatest pleasure,' he reiterated, repeating the words with a tender look for Magdalen, and a spiteful accent for Mrs. Lecount.

Thus far, Captain Wragge had remained silent; carefully noting in his mind the promising possibilities of a separation between Mrs. Lecount and her master, which Noel Vanstone's little fretful outbreak had just disclosed to him. An ominous trembling in the housekeeper's thin lips, as her master openly exposed her family affairs before strangers, and openly set her jealousy at defiance, now warned him to interfere. If the misunderstanding were permitted to proceed to extremities, there was a chance that the invitation for that evening to Sea View Cottage might be put off. Now, as ever, equal to the occasion, Captain Wragge called his useful information, once more to the rescue. Under the learned auspices of Joyce, he plunged, for the third time, into the ocean of science, and brought up another pearl. He was still haranguing (on Pneumatics this time), still improving Mrs. Lecount's mind with his politest perseverance and his smoothest flow of language—when the walking party stopped at Noel Vanstone's door.

'Bless my soul, here we are at your house, sir!' said the captain, interrupting himself in the middle of one of his graphic sentences. 'I won't keep you standing a moment. Not a word of apology, Mrs. Lecount, I beg and pray! I will put that curious point in Pneumatics more clearly before you on a future occasion. In the mean time, I need only repeat, that you can perform the experiment I have just mentioned, to your own entire satisfaction, with a bladder, an exhausted receiver, and a square box. At seven o'clock this evening, sir—at seven o'clock, Mrs. Lecount. We have had a remarkably pleasant walk, and a most instructive interchange of ideas. Now, my dear girl! your aunt is waiting for us.'

While Mrs. Lecount stepped aside to open the garden gate, Noel Vanstone seized his opportunity, and shot a last tender glance at Magdalen—under shelter of the umbrella, which he had taken into his own hands for that express purpose. 'Don't forget,' he said, with the sweetest smile; 'don't forget, when you come this evening, to wear that charming hat!' Before he could add any last words, Mrs. Lecount glided back to her place; and the sheltering umbrella changed hands again immediately.

'An excellent morning's work!' said Captain Wragge, as he and Magdalen walked on together to North Shingles. 'You and I and Joyce have all three done wonders. We have secured a friendly invitation at the first day's fishing for it.'

He paused for an answer; and, receiving none, observed Magdalen more attentively than he had observed her yet. Her face had turned deadly pale again; her eyes looked out mechanically straight before her, in heedless reckless despair.

'What is the matter?' he asked with the greatest surprise. 'Are you ill?'

She made no reply; she hardly seemed to hear him.

'Are you getting alarmed about Mrs. Lecount?' he inquired next. 'There is not the least reason for alarm. She may fancy she has heard something like your voice before; but your face evidently bewilders her. Keep your

temper, and you keep her in the dark. Keep her in the dark; and you will put that two hundred pounds into my hands before the autumn is over.'

He waited again for an answer; and again she remained silent. The captain tried for the third time, in another direction.

'Did you get any letters this morning?' he went on. 'Is there bad news again from home? Any fresh difficulties with your sister?'

'Say nothing about my sister!' she broke out passionately. 'Neither you nor I are fit to speak of her.'

She said those words at the garden gate, and hurried into the house by herself. He followed her, and heard the door of her own room violently shut to, violently locked and double-locked. Solacing his indignation by an oath, Captain Wragge sullenly went into one of the parlours on the ground floor to look after his wife. The room communicated with a smaller and darker room at the back of the house, by means of a quaint little door with a window in the upper half of it. Softly approaching this door, the captain lifted the white muslin curtain which hung over the window, and looked into the inner room.

There was Mrs. Wragge, with her cap on one side, and her shoes down at heel; with a row of pins between her teeth; with the Oriental Cashmere Robe slowly slipping off the table; with her scissors suspended uncertain in one hand, and her written directions for dressmaking held doubtfully in the other—so absorbed over the invincible difficulties of her employment, as to be perfectly unconscious that she was at that moment the object of her husband's superintending eye. Under other circumstances, she would have been soon brought to a sense of her situation by the sound of his voice. But Captain Wragge was too anxious about Magdalen to waste any time on his wife, after satisfying himself that she was safe in her seclusion, and that she might be trusted to remain there.

He left the parlour, and, after a little hesitation in the passage, stole upstairs, and listened anxiously outside Magdalen's door. A dull sound of sobbing—a sound stifled in her handkerchief, or stifled in the bed-clothes—was all that caught his ear. He returned at once to the ground floor, with some faint suspicion of the truth dawning on his mind at last.

'The devil take that sweetheart of hers!' thought the captain. 'Mr. Noel Vanstone has raised the ghost of him at starting.'

Chapter V

When Magdalen appeared in the parlour, shortly before seven o'clock, not a trace of discomposure was visible in her manner. She looked and spoke as quietly and unconcernedly as usual.

The lowering distrust on Captain Wragge's face cleared away at the sight of her. There had been moments during the afternoon, when he had seriously doubted whether the pleasure of satisfying the grudge he owed to Noel Vanstone, and the prospect of earning the sum of two hundred pounds, would not be dearly purchased, by running the risk of discovery to which Madgalen's uncertain temper might expose him at any hour of the day. The plain proof now before him of her powers of self-control, relieved his mind of a serious anxiety. It mattered little to the captain what she suffered in the privacy of her own chamber, as long as she came out of it with a face that would bear inspection, and a voice that betrayed nothing.

On the way to Sea View Cottage, Captain Wragge expressed his intention of asking the housekeeper a few sympathizing questions on the subject of her invalid brother in Switzerland. He was of opinion that the critical condition of this gentleman's health might exercise an important influence on the future progress of the conspiracy. Any chance of a separation, he remarked, between the housekeeper and her master was, under existing circumstances, a chance which merited the closest investigation. 'If we can only get Mrs. Lecount out of the way at the right time,' whispered the captain, as he opened his host's garden gate, 'our man is caught!'

In a minute more, Magdalen was again under Noel Vanstone's roof; this time in the character of his own invited guest.

The proceedings of the evening were for the most part a repetition of the proceedings during the morning walk. Noel Vanstone vibrated between his admiration of Magdalen's beauty and his glorification of his own possessions. Captain Wragge's inexhaustible outbursts of information—relieved by delicately-indirect inquiries relating to Mrs. Lecount's brother—perpetually diverted the housekeeper's jealous vigilance from dwelling on the looks and language of her master. So the evening passed until ten o'clock. By that time, the captain's ready-made science was exhausted, and the housekeeper's temper was forcing its way to the surface. Once more, Captain Wragge warned Magdalen by a look, and, in spite of Noel Vanstone's hospitable protest, wisely rose to say good-night.

'I have got my information,' remarked the captain, on the way back. 'Mrs. Lecount's brother lives at Zurich. He is a bachelor; he possesses a little money; and his sister is his nearest relation. If he will only be so obliging as to break up altogether, he will save us a world of trouble with Mrs. Lecount.'

It was a fine moonlight night. He looked round at Magdalen, as he said those words, to see if her intractable depression of spirits had seized on her again.

No! her variable humour had changed once more. She looked about her with a flaunting, feverish gaiety; she scoffed at the bare idea of any serious difficulty with Mrs. Lecount; she mimicked Noel Vanstone's high-pitched voice, and repeated Noel Vanstone's high-flown compliments, with a bitter enjoyment of turning him into ridicule. Instead of running into the house as before, she sauntered carelessly by her companion's side, humming litde snatches of song, and kicking the loose pebbles right and left on the garden walk. Captain Wragge hailed the change in her as the best of good omens. He thought he saw plain signs that the family spirit was at last coming back again.

'Well,' he said, as he lit her bedroom candle for her, 'when we all meet on the Parade to-morrow, we shall see, as our nautical friends say, how the land lies. One thing I can tell you, my dear girl—I have used my eyes to very little purpose, if there is not a storm brewing to-night in Mr. Noel Vanstone's domestic atmosphere.'

The captain's habitual penetration had not misled him. As soon as the door of Sea View Cottage was closed on the parting guests, Mrs. Lecount made an effort to assert the authority which Magdalen's influence was threatening already.

She employed every artifice of which she was mistress to ascertain Magdalen's true position in Noel Vanstone's estimation. She tried again and again to lure him into an unconscious confession of the pleasure which he felt already in the society of the beautiful Miss Bygrave; she twined herself in and out of every weakness in his character, as the frogs and efts twined themselves in and out of the rock-work of her Aquarium. But she made one serious mistake which very clever people in their intercourse with their intellectual inferiors are almost universally apt to commit—she trusted implicitly to the folly of a fool. She forgot that one of the lowest of human qualities—cunning—is exactly the capacity which is often most largely developed in the lowest of

intellectual natures. If she had been honestly angry with her master she would probably have frightened him. If she had opened her mind plainly to his view, she would have astonished him by presenting a chain of ideas to his limited perceptions, which they were not strong enough to grasp; his curiosity would have led him to ask for an explanation; and by practising on that curiosity, she might have had him at her mercy. As it was, she set her cunning against his—and the fool proved a match for her. Noel Vanstone, to whom all large-minded motives under heaven were inscrutable mysteries, saw the small-minded motive at the bottom of his housekeeper's conduct, with as instantaneous a penetration as if he had been a man of the highest ability. Mrs. Lecount left him for the night, foiled, and knowing she was foiled—left him, with the tigerish side of her uppermost, and a low-lived longing in her elegant finger-nails to set them in her master's face.

She was not a woman to be beaten by one defeat or by a hundred. She was positively determined to think, and think again, until she had found a means of checking the growing intimacy with the Bygraves at once and for ever. In the solitude of her own room, she recovered her composure, and set herself, for the first time, to review the conclusions which she had gathered from the events of the day.

There was something vaguely familiar to her in the voice of this Miss Bygrave; and, at the same time, in unaccountable contradiction, something strange to her as well. The face and figure of the young lady were entirely new to her. It was a striking face, and a striking figure; and if she had seen either, at any former period, she would certainly have remembered it. Miss Bygrave was unquestionably a stranger; and yet———

She had got no farther than this during the day; she could get no farther now: the chain of thought broke. Her mind took up the fragments, and formed another chain which attached itself to the lady who was kept in seclusion—to the aunt, who looked well, and yet was nervous; who was nervous, and yet able to ply her needle and thread. An incomprehensible resemblance to some unremembered voice, in the niece; an unintelligible malady which kept the aunt secluded from public view; an extraordinary range of scientific cultivation in the uncle, associated with a coarseness and audacity of manner which by no means suggested the idea of a man engaged in studious pursuits—were the members of this small family of three, what they seemed on the surface of them?

With that question on her mind, she went to bed.

As soon as the candle was out, the darkness seemed to communicate some inexplicable perversity to her thoughts. They wandered back from present things to past, in spite of her. They brought her old master back to life again; they revived forgotten sayings and doings in the English circle at Zurich; they veered away to the old man's death-bed at Brighton; they moved from Brighton to London; they entered the bare, comfordess room at VauxhaU Walk; they set the Aquarium back in its place on the kitchen table, and put the false Miss Garth in the chair by the side of it, shading her inflamed eyes from the light; they placed the anonymous letter, the letter which glanced darkly at a conspiracy, in her hand again, and brought her with it into her master's presence; they recalled the discussion about filling in the blank space in the advertisement, and the quarrel that followed, when she told Noel Vanstone that the sum he had offered was preposterously small; they revived an old doubt which had not troubled her for weeks past—a doubt whether the threatened conspiracy had evaporated in mere words, or whether she and her master were likely to hear of it again. At this point her thoughts broke off once more, and there was a momentary blank. The next instant she started up in bed; her heart beating violently, her head whirling as if she had lost her senses. With electric suddenness, her mind pieced together its scattered multitude of thoughts, and put them before her plainly under one intelligible form. In the all-mastering agitation of the moment, she clapped her hands together, and cried out suddenly in the darkness:

'Miss Vanstone again !!!'

She got out of bed and kindled the light once more. Steady as her nerves were, the shock of her own suspicion had shaken them. Her firm hand trembled as she opened her dressing-case, and took from it a little bottle of salvolatile. In spite of her smooth cheeks and her well-preserved hair, she looked every year of her age, as she mixed the spirit with water, greedily drank it, and, wrapping her dressing-gown round her, sat down on the bedside to get possession again of her calmer self.

She was quite incapable of tracing the mental process which had led her to discovery. She could not get sufficiently far from herself to see that her half-formed conclusions on the subject of the Bygraves, had ended in making that family objects of suspicion to her; that the association of ideas had thereupon carried her mind back to that other object of suspicion which was represented by the conspiracy against her master; and that the two ideas of those two separate subjects of distrust, coming suddenly in contact, had struck die light. She was not able to reason back in this way from the effect to the cause. She could only feel that the suspicion had become more than a suspicion already: conviction itself could not have been more firmly rooted in her mind.

Looking back at Magdalen by the new fight now thrown on her, Mrs. Lecount would fain have persuaded herself that she recognized some traces left of the false Miss Garth's face and figure, in the graceful and beautiful girl who had sat at her master's table hardly an hour since—that she found resemblances now, which she had never thought of before, between the angry voice she had heard in Vauxhall Walk, and the smooth well-bred tones which still hung on her ears, after the evening's experience down stairs. She would fain have persuaded herself that she had reached these results with no undue straining of the truth as she really knew it; but the effort was in vain.

Mrs. Lecount was not a woman to waste time and thought in trying to impose on herself. She accepted the inevitable conclusion that the guess-work of a moment had led her to discovery. And, more than that, she recognized the plain truth—unwelcome as it was—that the conviction now fixed in her own mind was, thus far, unsupported by a single fragment of producible evidence to justify it to the minds of others.

Under these circumstances, what was the safe course to take with her master?

If she candidly told him, when they met the next morning, what had passed through her mind that night, her knowledge of Noel Vanstone warned her that one of two results would certainly happen. Either he would be angry and disputatious; would ask for proofs; and, finding none forthcoming, would accuse her of alarming him without a cause, to serve her own jealous end of keeping Magdalen out of the house—or, he would be seriously startled, would clamour for the protection of the law, and would warn the Bygraves to stand on their defence at the outset. If Magdalen only had been concerned in the plot, this latter consequence would have assumed no great importance in the housekeeper's mind. But seeing the deception as she now saw it, she was far too clever a woman to fail in estimating the captain's inexhaustible fertility of resource at its true value. 'If I can't meet this impudent villain with plain proofs to help me,' thought Mrs. Lecount, 'I may open my master's eyes to-morrow morning, and Mr. Bygrave will shut them up again before night. The rascal is playing with all his own cards under the table; and he will win the game to a certainty if he sees my hand at starting.'

This policy of waiting was so manifestly the wise policy—the wily Mr. Bygrave was so sure to have provided himself, in case of emergency, with evidence to prove the identity which he and his niece had assumed for their purpose—that Mrs. Lecount at once decided to keep her own counsel the next morning, and to pause before attacking the conspiracy, until she could produce unanswerable facts to help her. Her master's acquaintance with the Bygraves was only an acquaintance of one day's standing. There was no fear of its developing into a dangerous intimacy if she merely allowed it to continue for a few days more, and if she permanently checked it, at the latest, in a week's time.

In that period, what measures could she take to remove the obstacles which now stood in her way, and to provide herself with the weapons which she now wanted?

Reflection showed her three different chances in her favour—three different ways of arriving at the necessary discovery.

The first chance was to cultivate friendly terms with Magdalen,—and then, taking her unawares, to entrap her into betraying herself in Noel Vanstone's presence. The second chance was to write to the elder Miss Vanstone, and to ask (with some alarming reason for putting the question) for information on the subject of her younger sister's whereabouts, and of any peculiarities in her personal appearance, which might enable a stranger to identify her. The third chance was to penetrate the mystery of Mrs. Bygrave's seclusion, and to ascertain at a personal interview whether the invalid lady's real complaint might not possibly be a defective capacity for keeping her husband's secrets. Resolving to try all three chances, in the order in which they are here enumerated, and to set her snares for Magdalen on the day that was now already at hand, Mrs. Lecount at last took off her dressing-gown and allowed her weaker nature to plead with her for a little sleep.

The dawn was breaking over the cold grey sea, as she lay down in her bed again. The last idea in her mind, before she fell asleep, was characteristic of the woman—it was an idea that threatened the captain. 'He has trifled with the sacred memory of my husband,' thought the Professor's widow. 'On my life and honour, I will make him pay for it!'

Early the next morning, Magdalen began the day—according to her agreement with the captain—by taking Mrs. Wragge out for a little exercise, at an hour when there was no fear of her attracting the public attention. She pleaded hard to be left at home; having the Oriental Cashmere Robe still on her mind, and feeling it necessary to read her directions for dressmaking, for the hundredth time at least, before (to use her own expression) she could 'screw up her courage to put the scissors into the stuff.' But her companion would take no denial, and she was forced to go out. The one guileless purpose of the life which Magdalen now led, was the resolution that poor Mrs. Wragge should not be made a prisoner on her account—and to that resolution she mechanically clung, as the last token left her by which she knew her better self.

They returned later than usual to breakfast. While Mrs. Wragge was up-stairs, straightening herself from head to foot to meet the morning inspection of her husband's orderly eye, and while Magdalen and the captain were waiting for her in the parlour, the servant came in with a note from Sea View Cottage. The messenger was waiting for an answer, and the note was addressed to Captain Wragge.

The captain opened the note, and read these lines:—

'Dear Sir,

'Mr. Noel Vanstone desires me to write and tell you that he proposes enjoying this fine day by taking a long drive to a place on the coast here, called Dunwich. He is anxious to know if you will share the expense of a carriage, and give him the pleasure of your company, and Miss Bygrave's company, on this excursion. I am kindly permitted to be one of the party, and if I may say so without impropriety, I would venture to add that I shall feel as much pleasure as my master if you and your young lady will consent to join us. We propose leaving Aldborough punctually at eleven o'clock.

'Believe me, dear sir,

'Your humble servant,

‘Virginie Lecount.’

‘Who is the letter from?’ asked Magdalen, noticing a change in Captain Wragge’s face, as he read it. ‘What do they want with us at Sea View Cottage?’

‘Pardon me,’ said the captain, gravely, ‘this requires consideration. Let me have a minute, or two to think.’

He took a few turns up and down the room—then suddenly stepped aside to a table in a comer, on which his writing materials were placed. ‘I was not bom yesterday, ma’am!’ said the captain, speaking jocosely to himself. He winked his brown eye, took up his pen, and wrote the answer.

‘Can you speak now?’ inquired Magdalen, when the servant had left the room. ‘What does that letter say, and how have you answered it?’

The captain placed the letter in her hand. ‘I have accepted the invitation,’ he replied, quietly.

Magdalen read the letter. ‘Hidden enmity yesterday,’ she said, ‘and open friendship to-day. What does it mean?’

‘It means,’ said Captain Wragge, ‘that Mrs. Lecount is even sharper than I thought her. She has found you out.’

‘Impossible,’ cried Magdalen. ‘Quite impossible in the time.’

‘I can’t say *how* she has found you out,’ proceeded the captain, with perfect composure. ‘She may know more of your voice than we supposed she knew. Or, she may have thought us, on reflection, rather a suspicious family; and anything suspicious in which a woman was concerned, may have taken her mind back to that morning call of yours in Vauxhall Walk. Whichever way it may be, the meaning of this sudden change is clear enough. She has found you out; and she wants to put her discovery to the proof, by slipping in an awkward question or two, under cover of a little friendly talk. My experience of humanity has been a varied one; and Mrs. Lecount is not the first sharp practitioner in petticoats whom I have had to deal with. All the world’s a stage, my dear girl—and one of the scenes on our little stage is shut in from this moment.’

With those words, he took his copy of Joyce’s Scientific Dialogues out of his pocket. ‘You’re done with already, my friend!’ said the captain, giving his useful information a farewell smack with his hand, and locking it up in the cupboard. ‘Such is human popularity!’ continued the indomitable vagabond, putting the key cheerfully in his pocket. ‘Yesterday, Joyce was my all-in-all. To-day, I don’t care that for him!’ He snapped his fingers and sat down to breakfast.

‘I don’t understand you,’ said Magdalen, looking at him angrily. ‘Are you leaving me to my own resources for the future?’

‘My dear girl!’ cried Captain Wragge, ‘can’t you accustom yourself to my dash of humour yet? I have done with my ready-made science, simply because I am quite sure that Mrs. Lecount has done believing in me. Haven’t I accepted the invitation to Dunwich? Make your mind easy. The help I have given you already, counts for nothing compared with the help I am going to give you now. My honour is concerned in bowling out Mrs. Lecount. This last move of hers has made it a personal matter between us. *The woman actually thinks she can take me in!!!'* cried the captain, striking his knife-handle on the table in a transport of virtuous indignation. ‘By Heavens I never was so insulted before in my life! Draw your chair in to the table, my dear; and give me half a minute’s attention to what I have to say next.’

Magdalen obeyed him. Captain Wragge cautiously lowered his voice before he went on.

‘I have told you all along,’ he said, ‘the one thing needful is never to let Mrs. Lecount catch you with your wits woolgathering. I say the same after what has happened this morning. Let her suspect you! I defy her to find a fragment of foundation for her suspicions, unless we help her. We shall see to-day if she has been foolish enough to betray herself to her master before she has any facts to support her. I doubt it. If she has told him, we will rain down proofs of our identity with the Bygraves on his feeble little head, till it absolutely aches with conviction. You have two things to do on this excursion. First, to distrust every word Mrs. Lecount says to you. Secondly, to exert all your fascinations, and make sure of Mr. Noel Vanstone, dating from to-day. I will give you the opportunity, when we leave the carriage, and take our walk at Dunwich. Wear your hat, wear your smile; do your figure justice, lace tight; put on your neatest boots and brightest gloves; tie the miserable little wretch to your apron-string—tie him fast; and leave the whole management of the matter after that, to me. Steady! here is Mrs. Wragge: we must be doubly careful in looking after her now. Show me your cap, Mrs. Wragge! show me your shoes! What do I see on your apron? A spot? I won’t have spots! Take it off after breakfast, and put on another. Pull your chair to the middle of the table—more to the left—more still. Make the breakfast.’

At a quarter before eleven, Mrs. Wragge (with her own entire concurrence) was dismissed to the back room, to bewilder herself over the science of dressmaking for the rest of the day. Punctually as the clock struck the hour, Mrs. Lecount and her master drove up to the gate of North Shingles, and found Magdalen and Captain Wragge waiting for them in the garden.

On the way to Dunwich nothing occurred to disturb the enjoyment of the drive. Noel Vanstone was in excellent health and high good humour. Lecount had apologized for the little misunderstanding of the previous night; Lecount had petitioned for the excursion as a treat to herself. He thought of these concessions, and looked at Magdalen, and smirked and simpered without intermission. Mrs. Lecount acted her part to perfection. She was motherly with Magdalen, and tenderly attentive to Noel Vanstone. She was deeply interested in Captain Wragge’s conversation, and meekly disappointed to find it turn on general subjects, to the exclusion of science. Not a word or look escaped her, which hinted in the remotest degree at her real purpose. She was dressed with her customary elegance and propriety; and she was the only one of the party, on that sultry summer’s day, who was perfectly cool in the hottest part of the journey.

As they left the carriage on their arrival at Dunwich, the captain seized a moment, when Mrs. Lecount’s eye was off him, and fortified Magdalen by a last warning word.

‘ ’Ware the cat!’ he whispered. ‘She will show her claws on the way back.’

They left the village and walked to the ruins of a convent near at hand—the last relic of the once-populous city of Dunwich which has survived the destruction of the place, centuries since, by the all-devouring sea. After looking at the ruins, they sought the shade of a little wood, between the village and the low sand-hills which overlook the German Ocean. Here, Captain Wragge manoeuvred so as to let Magdalen and Noel Vanstone advance some distance in front of Mrs. Lecount and himself—took the wrong path—and immediately lost his way with the most consummate dexterity. After a few minutes’ wandering (in the wrong direction), he reached an open space near the sea; and politely opening his camp-stool for the housekeeper’s accommodation, proposed waiting where they were, until the missing members of the party came that way and discovered them.

Mrs. Lecount accepted the proposal. She was perfectly well aware that her escort had lost himself on purpose; but that discovery exercised no disturbing influence on the smooth amiability of her manner. Her day of reckoning with the captain had not come yet—she merely added the new item to her list, and availed herself of the camp-stool. Captain Wragge stretched himself in a romantic attitude at her feet; and the two determined enemies (grouped like two lovers in a picture) fell into as easy and pleasant a conversation, as if they had been

friends of twenty years' standing.

'I know you, ma'am!' thought the captain, while Mrs. Lecount was talking to him. 'You would like to catch me tripping in my ready-made science; and you wouldn't object to drown me in the Professor's Tank!'

'You villain with the brown eye and the green!' thought Mrs. Lecount, as the captain caught the ball of conversation in his turn; 'thick as your skin is, I'll sting you through it yet!'

In this frame of mind towards each other, they talked fluently on general subjects, on public affairs, on local scenery, on society in England and society in Switzerland, on health, climate, books, marriage, and money—talked, without a moment's pause, without a single misunderstanding on either side, for nearly an hour, before Magdalen and Noel Vanstone strayed that way, and made the party of four complete again.

When they reached the inn at which the carriage was waiting for them, Captain Wragge left Mrs. Lecount in undisturbed possession of her master, and signed to Magdalen to drop back for a moment and speak to him.

'Well?' asked the captain in a whisper; 'is he fast to your apron-string?'

She shuddered from head to foot, as she answered.

'He has kissed my hand,' she said. 'Does that tell you enough? Don't let him sit next me on the way home! I have borne all I can bear—spare me for the rest of the day.'

'I'll put you on the front seat of the carriage,' replied the captain, 'side by side with me.'

On the journey back, Mrs. Lecount verified Captain Wragge's prediction. She showed her claws.

The time could not have been better chosen; the circumstances could hardly have favoured her more. Magdalen's spirits were depressed: she was weary in body and mind; and she sat exactly opposite the housekeeper—who had been compelled, by the new arrangement, to occupy the seat of honour next her master. With every facility for observing the slightest changes that passed over Magdalen's face, Mrs. Lecount tried her first experiment by leading the conversation to the subject of London, and to the relative advantages offered to residents by the various quarters of the metropolis on both sides of the river. The ever-ready Wragge penetrated her intention sooner than she had anticipated, and interposed immediately. 'You're coming to Vauxhall Walk, ma'am,' thought the captain; 'I'll get there before you.'

He entered at once into a purely fictitious description of the various quarters of London in which he had himself resided; and, adroitly mentioning Vauxhall Walk as one of them, saved Magdalen from the sudden question relating to that very locality, with which Mrs. Lecount had proposed startling her to begin with. From his residences, he passed smoothly to himself; and poured his whole family history (in the Character of Mr. Bygrave) into the housekeeper's ears—not forgetting his brother's grave in Honduras, with the monument by the self-taught negro artist; and his brother's hugely corpulent widow, on the ground floor of the boardinghouse at Cheltenham. As a means of giving Magdalen time to compose herself, this outburst of autobiographical information attained its object, but it answered no other purpose. Mrs. Lecount listened, without being imposed on by a single word the captain said to her. He merely confirmed her conviction of the hopelessness of taking Noel Vanstone into her confidence, before she had facts to help her against Captain Wragge's otherwise unassailable position in the identity which he had assumed. She quietly waited until he had done, and then returned to the charge.

'It is a coincidence that your uncle should once have resided in Vauxhall Walk,' she said, addressing herself to Magdalen. 'Mr. Noel has a house in the same place; and we lived there before we came to Aldborough. May I

inquire, Miss Bygrave, whether you know anything of a lady named Miss Garth.'

This time, she put the question before the captain could interfere. Magdalen ought to have been prepared for it by what had already passed in her presence—but her nerves had been shaken by the earlier events of the day; and she could only answer the question in the negative, after an instant's preliminary pause to control herself. Her hesitation was of too momentary a nature to attract the attention of any unsuspicious person. But it lasted long enough to confirm Mrs. Lecount's private convictions, and to encourage her to advance a little further.

'I only asked,' she continued, steadily fixing her eyes on Magdalen, steadily disregarding the efforts which Captain Wragge made to join in the conversation, 'because Miss Garth is a stranger to me; and I am curious to find out what I can about her. The day before we left town, Miss Bygrave, a person who presented herself under the name I have mentioned, paid us a visit under very extraordinary circumstances.'

With a smooth, ingratiating manner; with a refinement of contempt which was little less than devilish in its ingenious assumption of the language of pity, she now boldly described Magdalen's appearance in disguise, in Magdalen's own presence. She slightingly referred to the master and mistress of Combe-Raven, as persons who had always annoyed the elder and more respectable branch of the family; she mourned over the children as following their parent's example, and attempting to take a mercenary advantage of Mr. Noel Vanstone, under the protection of a respectable person's character and a respectable person's name. Cleverly including her master in the conversation, so as to prevent the captain from effecting a diversion in that quarter; sparing no petty aggravation; striking at every tender place which the tongue of a spiteful woman can wound—she would, beyond all doubt, have carried her point, and tortured Magdalen into openly betraying herself, if Captain Wragge had not checked her in full career, by a loud exclamation of alarm, and a sudden clutch at Magdalen's wrist.

'Ten thousand pardons, my dear madam!' cried the captain. 'I see in my niece's face, I feel in my niece's pulse, that one of her violent neuralgic attacks has come on again. My dear girl, why hesitate among friends to confess that you are in pain? What mistimed politeness! Her face shows she is suffering—doesn't it, Mrs. Lecount? Darting pains, Mr. Vanstone, darting pains on the left side of the head. Pull down your veil, my dear, and lean on me. Our friends will excuse you; our excellent friends will excuse you for the rest of the day.'

Before Mrs. Lecount could throw an instant's doubt on the genuineness of the neuralgic attack, her master's fidgety sympathy declared itself, exactly as the captain had anticipated, in the most active manifestations. He stopped the carriage, and insisted on an immediate change in the arrangement of the places—the comfortable back seat for Miss Bygrave and her uncle; the front seat for Lecount and himself. Had Lecount got her smelling-bottle? Excellent creature! let her give it directly to Miss Bygrave, and let the coachman drive carefully. If the coachman shook Miss Bygrave he should not have a halfpenny for himself. Mesmerism was frequently useful in these cases.* Mr. Noel Vanstone's father had been the most powerful mesmerist in Europe; and Mr. Noel Vanstone was his father's son. Might he mesmerize? Might he order that infernal coachman to draw up in a shady place adapted for the purpose? Would medical help be preferred? Gould medical help be found any nearer than Aldborough? That ass of a coachman didn't know. Stop every respectable man who passed in a gig, and ask him if he was a doctor! So Mr. Noel Vanstone ran on—with brief intervals for breathing-time—in a continually-ascending scale of sympathy and self-importance, throughout the drive home.

Mrs. Lecount accepted her defeat, without uttering a word. From the moment when Captain Wragge interrupted her, her thin lips closed, and opened no more for the remainder of the journey. The warmest expressions of her master's anxiety for the suffering young lady, provoked from her no outward manifestations of anger. She took as little notice of him as possible. She paid no attention whatever to the captain, whose exasperating consideration for his vanquished enemy, made him more polite to her than ever. The nearer and the nearer they

got to Aldborough, the more and more fixedly Mrs. Lecount's hard black eyes looked at Magdalen reclining on the opposite seat, with her eyes closed and her veil down.

It was only when the carriage stopped at North Shingles, and when Captain Wragge was handing Magdalen out, that the housekeeper at last condescended to notice him. As he smiled and took off his hat at the carriage-door, the strong restraint she had laid on herself suddenly gave way; and she flashed one look at him, which scorched up the captain's politeness on the spot. He turned at once, with a hasty acknowledgment of Noel Vanstone's last sympathetic inquiries, and took Magdalen into the house.

'I told you she would show her claws,' he said. 'It is not my fault that she scratched you before I could stop her. She hasn't hurt you, has she?'

'She has hurt me, to some purpose,' said Magdalen—'she has given me the courage to go on. Say what must be done, to-morrow, and trust me to do it.' She sighed heavily as she said those words, and went up to her room.

Captain Wragge walked meditatively into the parlour, and sat down to consider. He felt by no means so certain as he could have wished, of the next proceeding on the part of the enemy after the defeat of that day. The housekeeper's farewell look had plainly informed him that she was not at the end of her resources yet; and the old militiaman felt the full importance of preparing himself in good time to meet the next step which she took in advance. He lit a cigar, and bent his wary mind on the dangers of the future.

While Captain Wragge was considering in the parlour at North Shingles, Mrs. Lecount was meditating in her bedroom at Sea View. Her exasperation at the failure of her first attempt to expose the conspiracy, had not blinded her to the instant necessity of making a second effort, before Noel Vanstone's growing infatuation got beyond her control. The snare set for Magdalen having failed, the chance of entrapping Magdalen's sister was the next chance to try. Mrs. Lecount ordered a cup of tea; opened her writing-case; and began the rough draught of a letter to be sent to Miss Vanstone the elder by the morrow's post.

So the day's skirmish ended. The heat of the battle was yet to come.

Chapter VI

All human penetration has its limits. Accurately as Captain Wragge had seen his way hitherto, even his sharp insight was now at fault. He finished his cigar with the mortifying conviction that he was totally unprepared for Mrs. Lecount's next proceeding.

In this emergency, his experience warned him that there was one safe course, and one only, which he could take. He resolved to try the confusing effect on the housekeeper of a complete change of tactics, before she had time to press her advantage, and attack him in the dark. With this view he sent the servant upstairs, to request that Miss Bygrave would come down and speak to him.

'I hope I don't disturb you,' said the captain, when Magdalen entered the room. 'Allow me to apologize for the smell of tobacco, and to say two words on the subject of our next proceedings. To put it with my customary frankness, Mrs. Lecount puzzles me, and I propose to return the compliment by puzzling her. The course of action which I have to suggest is a veiy simple one. I have had the honour of giving you a severe neuralgic attack already, and I beg your permission (when Mr. Noel Vanstone sends to inquire to-morrow morning) to take the further liberty of laying you up altogether. Question from Sea View Cottage: "How is Miss Bygrave

this morning?" Answer from North Shingles: "Much worse: Miss Bygrave is confined to her room." Question repeated every day, say for a fortnight: "How is Miss Bygrave?" Answer repeated, if necessary, for the same time: "No better." Can you bear the imprisonment? I see no objection to your getting a breath of fresh air the first thing in the morning, or the last thing at night. But for the whole of the day, there is no disguising it, you must put yourself in the same category with Mrs. Wragge—you must keep your room.'

'What is your object in wishing me to do this?' inquired Magdalen.

'My object is twofold,' replied the captain. 'I blush for my own stupidity; but the fact is I can't see my way plainly to Mrs. Lecount's next move. All I feel sure of is, that she means to make another attempt at opening her master's eyes to the truth. Whatever means she may employ to discover your identity, personal communication with you, *must* be necessary to the accomplishment of her object. Very good. If I stop that communication, I put an obstacle in her way at starting—or, as we say at cards, I force her hand. Do you see the point?'

Magdalen saw it plainly. The captain went on.

'My second reason for shutting you up,' he said, 'refers entirely to Mrs. Lecount's master. The growth of love, my dear girl, is, in one respect, unlike all other growths—it flourishes under adverse circumstances. Our first course of action is to make Mr. Noel Vanstone feel the charm of your society. Our next, is to drive him distracted by the loss of it. I should have proposed a few more meetings, with a view to furthering this end, but for our present critical position towards Mrs. Lecount. As it is, we must trust to the effect you produced yesterday, and try the experiment of a sudden separation rather sooner than I could have otherwise wished. I shall see Mr. Noel Vanstone, though you don't—and if there *is* a raw place established anywhere about the region of that gentleman's heart, trust me to hit him on it! You are now in full possession of my views. Take your time to consider, and give me your answer—Yes or No.'

'Any change is for the better,' said Magdalen, 'which keeps me out of the company of Mrs. Lecount and her master! Let it be as you wish.'

She had hitherto answered faintly and wearily; but she spoke those last words with a heightened tone, and a rising colour—signs which warned Captain Wragge not to press her farther.

'Very good,' said the captain. 'As usual, we understand each other. I see you are tired; and I won't detain you any longer.'

He rose to open the door, stopped half-way to it, and came back again. 'Leave me to arrange matters with the servant downstairs,' he continued. 'You can't absolutely keep your bed; and we must purchase the girl's discretion when she answers the door—without taking her into our confidence, of course. I will make her understand that she is to say you are ill, just as she might say you are not at home, as a way of keeping unwelcome acquaintances out of the house. Allow me to open the door for you.—I beg your pardon, you are going into Mrs. Wragge's work-room, instead of going to your own.'

'I know I am,' said Magdalen. 'I wish to remove Mrs. Wragge from the miserable room she is in now, and to take her upstairs with me.'

'For the evening?'

'For the whole fortnight.'

Captain Wragge followed her into the dining-room and wisely closed the door before he spoke again.

‘Do you seriously mean to inflict my wife’s society on yourself, for a fortnight?’ he asked, in great surprise.

‘Your wife is the only innocent creature in this guilty house,’ she burst out vehemently. ‘I must and will have her with me!’

‘Pray don’t agitate yourself,’ said the captain. ‘Take Mrs. Wragge by all means. I don’t want her.’ Having resigned the partner of his existence in those terms, he discreetly returned to the parlour. ‘The weakness of the sex!’ thought the captain, tapping his sagacious head. ‘Lay a strain on the female intellect—and the female temper gives way directly.’

The strain, to which the captain alluded, was not confined that evening, to the female intellect at North Shingles: it extended to the female intellect at Sea View. For nearly two hours, Mrs. Lecount sat at her desk, writing, correcting, and writing again, before she could produce a letter to Miss Vanstone the elder, which exactly accomplished the object she wanted to attain. At last, the rough draft was completed to her satisfaction; and she made a fair copy of it, forthwith, to be posted the next day.

Her letter thus produced, was a master-piece of ingenuity. After the first preliminary sentences, the housekeeper plainly informed Norah of the appearance of the visitor in disguise at Vauxhall Walk; of the conversation which passed at the interview; and of her own suspicion that the person claiming to be Miss Garth was, in all probability, the younger Miss Vanstone herself. Having told the truth, thus far, Mrs. Lecount next proceeded to say, that her master was in possession of evidence which would justify him in putting the law in force; that he knew the conspiracy with which he was threatened to be then in process of direction against him at Aldborough; and that he only hesitated to protect himself, in deference to family considerations, and in the hope that the elder Miss Vanstone might so influence her sister, as to render it unnecessary to proceed to extremities.

Under these circumstances (the letter continued) it was plainly necessary that the disguised visitor to Vauxhall Walk should be properly identified—for if Mrs. Lecount’s guess proved to be wrong, and if the person turned out to be a stranger, Mr. Noel Vanstone was positively resolved to prosecute in his own defence. Events at Aldborough, on which it was not necessary to dwell, would enable Mrs. Lecount in a few days to gain sight of the suspected person in her own character. But as the housekeeper was entirely unacquainted with the younger Miss Vanstone, it was obviously desirable that some better informed person should, in this particular, take the matter in hand. If the elder Miss Vanstone happened to be at liberty to come to Aldborough herself, would she kindly write and say so?—and Mrs. Lecount would write back again to appoint a day. If, on the other hand, Miss Vanstone was prevented from taking the journey, Mrs. Lecount suggested that her reply should contain the fullest description of her sister’s personal appearance—should mention any little peculiarities which might exist in the way of marks on her face or her hands—and should state (in case she had written lately) what the address was in her last letter, and failing that, what the post-mark was on the envelope. With this information to help her, Mrs. Lecount would, in the interest of the misguided young lady herself, accept the responsibility of privately identifying her; and would write back immediately to acquaint the elder Miss Vanstone with the result.

The difficulty of sending this letter to the right address gave Mrs. Lecount very little trouble. Remembering the name of the lawyer who had pleaded the cause of the two sisters in Michael Vanstone’s time, she directed her letter to ‘Miss Vanstone, care of————————Pendril, Esquire, London.’ This she enclosed in a second envelope, addressed to Mr. Noel Vanstone’s solicitor, with a line inside, requesting that gentleman to send it at once to the office of Mr. Pendril.

‘Now,’ thought Mrs. Lecount, as she locked the letter up in her desk, preparatory to posting it the next day, with her own hand; ‘now I have got her!’

The next morning, the servant from Sea View came, with her master's compliments, to make inquiries after Miss Bygrave's health. Captain Wragge's bulletin was duly announced—Miss Bygrave was so ill, as to be confined to her room.

On the reception of this intelligence, Noel Vanstone's anxiety led him to call at North Shingles himself, when he went out for his afternoon walk. Miss Bygrave was no better. He inquired if he could see Mr. Bygrave. The worthy captain was prepared to meet this emergency. He thought a little irritating suspense would do Noel Vanstone no harm; and he had carefully charged the servant, in case of necessity, with her answer:—'Mr. Bygrave begged to be excused; he was not able to see any one.'

On the second day, inquiries were made as before, by message in the morning, and by Noel Vanstone himself in the afternoon. The morning answer (relating to Magdalen) was, 'a shade better.' The afternoon answer (relating to Captain Wragge) was, 'Mr. Bygrave has just gone out.' That evening, Noel Vanstone's temper was very uncertain; and Mrs. Lecount's patience and tact were sorely tried in the effort to avoid offending him.

On the third morning, the report of the suffering young lady was less favourable—'Miss Bygrave was still very poorly, and not able to leave her bed.' The servant returning to Sea View with this message, met the postman, and took into the breakfast-room with her two letters addressed to Mrs. Lecount.

The first letter was in a handwriting familiar to the housekeeper. It was from the medical attendant on her invalid brother at Zurich; and it announced that the patient's malady had latterly altered in so marked a manner for the better, that there was every hope now of preserving his life.

The address on the second letter was in a strange handwriting. Mrs. Lecount, concluding that it was the answer from Miss Vanstone, waited to read it until breakfast was over, and she could retire to her own room.

She opened the letter, looked at once for the name at the end, and started a little as she read it. The signature was not 'Norah Vanstone,' but 'Harriet Garth.'

Miss Garth announced that the elder Miss Vanstone had, a week since, accepted an engagement as governess—subject to the condition of joining the family of her employer at their temporary residence in the south of France, and of returning with them when they came back to England, probably in a month or six weeks' time. During the interval of this necessary absence, Miss Vanstone had requested Miss Garth to open all her letters; her main object in making that arrangement being to provide for the speedy answering of any communication which might arrive for her from her sister. Miss Magdalen Vanstone had not written since the middle of July—on which occasion the post-mark on the letter showed that it must have been posted in London, in the district of Lambeth—and her elder sister had left England in a state of the most distressing anxiety on her account.

Having completed this explanation, Miss Garth then mentioned that family circumstances prevented her from travelling personally to Aldborough to assist Mrs. Lecount's object—but that she was provided with a substitute, in every way fitter for the purpose, in the person of Mr. Pendril. That gentleman was well acquainted with Miss Magdalen Vanstone; and his professional experience and discretion would render his assistance doubly valuable. He had kindly consented to travel to Aldborough whenever it might be thought necessary. But, as his time was very valuable, Miss Garth specially requested that he might not be sent for, until Mrs. Lecount was quite sure of the day on which his services might be required.

While proposing this arrangement, Miss Garth added that she thought it right to furnish her correspondent with a written description of the younger Miss Vanstone, as well. An emergency might happen which would allow Mrs. Lecount no time for securing Mr. Pendril's services; and the execution of Mr. Noel Vanstone's intentions towards the unhappy girl who was the object of his forbearance, might be fatally delayed by an unforeseen

difficulty in establishing her identity. The personal description, transmitted under these circumstances, then followed. It omitted no personal peculiarity by which Magdalen could be recognized; and it included the ‘two little moles close together on the left side of the neck,’ which had been formerly mentioned in the printed handbills sent to York.

In conclusion, Miss Garth expressed her fears that Mrs. Lecount’s suspicions were only too likely to be proved true. While, however, there was the faintest chance that the conspiracy might turn out to be directed by a stranger, Miss Garth felt bound in gratitude towards Mr. Noel Vanstone, to assist the legal proceedings which would, in that case, be instituted. She accordingly appended her own formal denial—which she would personally repeat, if necessary—of any identity between herself and the person in disguise who had made use of her name. She was the Miss Garth who had filled the situation of the late Mr. Andrew Vanstone’s governess; and she had never in her life been in, or near, the neighbourhood of Vauxhall Walk.

With this disclaimer—and with the writer’s fervent assurances that she would do all for Magdalen’s advantage which her sister might have done, if her sister had been in England—the letter concluded. It was signed in full, and was dated with the business-like accuracy in such manners which had always distinguished Miss Garth’s character.

This letter placed a formidable weapon in the housekeeper’s hands.

It provided a means of establishing Magdalen’s identity through the intervention of a lawyer by profession. It contained a personal description minute enough to be used to advantage, if necessary, before Mr. Pendril’s appearance. It presented a signed exposure of the false Miss Garth, under the hand of the true Miss Garth; and it established the fact, that the last letter received by the elder Miss Vanstone from the younger, had been posted (and therefore probably written) in the neighbourhood of Vauxhall Walk. If any later letter had been received, with the Aldborough postmark, the chain of evidence, so far as the question of localities was concerned, might doubtless have been more complete. But, as it was, there was testimony enough (aided as that testimony might be, by the fragment of the brown alpaca dress still in Mrs. Lecount’s possession) to raise the veil which hung over the conspiracy, and to place Mr. Noel Vanstone face to face with the plain and startling truth.

The one obstacle which now stood in the way of immediate action on the housekeeper’s part, was the obstacle of Miss Bygrave’s present seclusion within the limits of her own room. The question of gaining personal access to her, was a question which must be decided before any communication could be opened with Mr. Pendril. Mrs. Lecount put on her bonnet at once, and called at North Shingles to try what discoveries she could make for herself, before post-time.

On this occasion, Mr. Bygrave was at home; and she was admitted without the least difficulty.

Careful consideration that morning had decided Captain Wragge on advancing matters a litde nearer to the crisis. The means by which he proposed achieving this result, made it necessary for him to see the housekeeper and her master separately, and to set them at variance by producing two totally opposite impressions relating to himself, on their minds. Mrs. Lecount’s visit, therefore, instead of causing him any embarrassment, was the most welcome occurrence he could have wished for. He received her in the parlour, with a marked restraint of manner, for which she was quite unprepared. His ingratiating smile was gone, and an impenetrable solemnity of countenance appeared in its stead.

‘I have ventured to intrude on you, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount, ‘to express the regret with which both my master and I have heard of Miss Bygrave’s illness. Is there no improvement?’

‘No, ma’am,’ replied the captain, as briefly as possible. ‘My niece is no better.’

‘I have had some experience, Mr. Bygrave, in nursing. If I could be of any use———’

‘Thank you, Mrs. Lecount. There is no necessity for our taking advantage of your kindness.’

This plain answer was followed by a moment’s silence. The housekeeper felt some litde perplexity. What had become of Mr. Bygrave’s elaborate courtesy, and Mr. Bygrave’s many words? Did he want to offend her? If he did, Mrs. Lecount then and there determined that he should not gain his object.

‘May I inquire the nature of the illness?’ she persisted. ‘It is not connected, I hope, with our excursion to Dunwich?’

‘I regret to say, ma’am,’ replied the captain, ‘it began with that neuralgic attack in the carriage.’

‘So! so!’ thought Mrs. Lecount. ‘He doesn’t even *try* to make me think the illness a real one; he throws off the mask, at starting—Is it a nervous illness, sir?’ she added, aloud.

The captain answered by a solemn affirmative inclination of the head.

‘Then you have *two* nervous sufferers in the house, Mr. Bygrave?’

‘Yes, ma’am—two. My wife and my niece.’

‘That is rather a strange coincidence of misfortunes.’

‘It is, ma’am. Very strange.’

In spite of Mrs. Lecount’s resolution not to be offended, Captain Wragge’s exasperating insensibility to every stroke she aimed at him, began to ruffle her. She was conscious of some little difficulty in securing her self-possession, before she could say anything more.

‘Is there no immediate hope,’ she resumed, ‘of Miss Bygrave being able to leave her room?’

‘None whatever, ma’am.’

‘You are satisfied, I suppose, with the medical attendance?’

‘I have no medical attendance,’ said the captain, composedly. ‘I watch the case myself.’

The gathering venom in Mrs. Lecount swelled up at that reply, and overflowed at her lips.

‘Your smattering of science, sir,’ she said, with a malicious smile, ‘includes, I presume, a smattering of medicine as well?’

‘It does, ma’am,’ answered the captain, without the slightest disturbance of face or manner. ‘I know as much of one as I do of the other.’

The tone in which he spoke those words, left Mrs. Lecount but one dignified alternative. She rose to terminate the interview. The temptation of the moment proved too much for her; and she could not resist casting the shadow of a threat over Captain Wragge at parting.

‘I defer thanking you, sir, for the manner in which you have received me,’ she said, ‘until I can pay my debt of obligation to some purpose. In the mean time, I am glad to infer, from the absence of a medical attendant in the house, that Miss Bygrave’s illness is much less serious than I had supposed it to be when I came here.’

‘I never contradict a lady, ma’am,’ rejoined the incorrigible captain. ‘If it is your pleasure, when we next meet, to think my niece quite well, I shall bow resignedly to the expression of your opinion.’ With those words he followed the housekeeper into the passage, and politely opened the door for her. ‘I mark the trick, ma’am!5 he said to himself, as he closed it again. ‘The trump-card in your hand is a sight of my niece; and I’ll take care you don’t play it!’

He returned to the parlour, and composedly awaited the next event which was likely to happen—a visit from Mrs. Lecount’s master. In less than an hour, results justified Captain Wragge’s anticipations; and Noel Vanstone walked in.

‘My dear sir!’ cried the captain, cordially seizing his visitor’s reluctant hand, ‘I know what you have come for. Mrs. Lecount has told you of her visit here, and has no doubt declared that my niece’s illness is a mere subterfuge. You feel surprised, you feel hurt—you suspect me of trifling with your kind sympathies—in short, you require an explanation. That explanation you shall have. Take a seat, Mr. Vanstone. I am about to throw myself on your sense and judgment as a man of the world. I acknowledge that we are in a false position, sir; and I tell you plainly at the outset—your housekeeper is the cause of it.’

For once in his life, Noel Vanstone opened his eyes. ‘Lecount!’ he exclaimed, in the utmost bewilderment.

‘The same, sir,’ replied Captain Wragge. ‘I am afraid I offended Mrs. Lecount, when she came here this morning, by a want of cordiality in my manner. I am a plain man; and I can’t assume what I don’t feel. Far be it from me to breathe a word against your housekeeper’s character. She is, no doubt, a most excellent and trustworthy woman; but she has one serious failing common to persons at her time of life who occupy her situation—she is jealous of her influence over her master, although you may not have observed it.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ interposed Noel Vanstone; ‘my observation is remarkably quick. Nothing escapes me.’

‘In that case, sir,’ resumed the captain, ‘you cannot fail to have noticed that Mrs. Lecount has allowed her jealousy to affect her conduct towards my niece?’

Noel Vanstone thought of the domestic passage at arms between Mrs. Lecount and himself, when his guests of the evening had left Sea View, and failed to see his way to any direct reply. He expressed the utmost surprise and distress—he thought Lecount had done her best to be agreeable on the drive to Dunwich—he hoped and trusted there was some unfortunate mistake.

‘Do you mean to say, sir,’ pursued the captain, severely, ‘that you have not noticed the circumstance yourself? As a man of honour, and a man of observation, you can’t tell me that! Your housekeeper’s superficial civility has not hidden your housekeeper’s real feeling. My niece has seen it, and so have you, and so have I. My niece, Mr. Vanstone, is a sensitive, high-spirited girl; and she has positively declined to cultivate Mrs. Lecount’s society, for the future. Don’t misunderstand me! To my niece, as well as to myself, the attraction of *your* society, Mr. Vanstone, remains the same. Miss Bygrave simply declines to be an apple of discord (if you will permit the classical allusion) cast into your household. I think she is right, so far; and I frankly confess that I have exaggerated a nervous indisposition, from which she is really suffering, into a serious illness—purely and entirely to prevent these two ladies, for the present, from meeting every day on the Parade, and from carrying unpleasant impressions of each other into your domestic establishment and mine.’

‘I allow nothing unpleasant in *my* establishment,’ remarked Noel Vanstone. ‘I’m master—you must have noticed that already, Mr. Bygrave?—I’m master.’

‘No doubt of it, my dear sir. But to live morning, noon, and night, in the perpetual exercise of your authority, is

more like the life of a governor of a prison than the life of a master of a household. The wear and tear—consider the wear and tear.'

'It strikes you in that light, does it?' said Noel Vanstone, soothed by Captain Wragge's ready recognition of his authority. 'I don't know that you're not right. But I must take some steps directly. I won't be made ridiculous—I'll send Lecount away altogether, sooner than be made ridiculous.' His colour rose; and he folded his litde arms fiercely. Captain Wragge's artfully-irritating explanation had awakened that dormant suspicion of his housekeeper's influence over him, which habitually lay hidden in his mind; and which Mrs. Lecount was now not present to charm back to repose as usual. 'What must Miss Bygrave think of me!' he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of vexation. 'I'll send Lecount away. Damme, I'll send Lecount away on the spot!'

'No, no, no!' said the captain, whose interest it was to avoid driving Mrs. Lecount to any desperate extremities. 'Why take strong measures, when mild measures will do? Mrs. Lecount is an old servant; Mrs. Lecount is attached and useful. She has this litde drawback of jealousy—jealousy of her domestic position with her bachelor master. She sees you paying courteous attention to a handsome young lady; she sees that young lady properly sensible of your politeness—and, poor soul, she loses her temper! What is the obvious remedy? Humour her—make a manly concession to the weaker sex. If Mrs. Lecount is with you, the next time we meet on the Parade, walk the other way. If Mrs. Lecount is not with you, give us the pleasure of your company by all means. In short, my dear sir, try the *suaviter in modo* (as we classical men say), before you commit yourself to the *fortiter in re*!'*

There was one excellent reason why Noel Vanstone should take Captain Wragge's conciliatory advice. An open rupture with Mrs. Lecount—even if he could have summoned the courage to face it—would imply the recognition of her claims to a provision, in acknowledgment of the services she had rendered to his father and to himself. His sordid nature quailed within him at the bare prospect of expressing the emotion of gratitude in a pecuniary form; and, after first consulting appearances by a show of hesitation, he consented to adopt the captain's suggestion, and to humour Mrs. Lecount.

'But I must be considered in this matter,' proceeded Noel Vanstone. 'My concession to Lecount's weakness must not be misunderstood. Miss Bygrave must not be allowed to suppose I am afraid of my housekeeper.'

The captain declared that no such idea ever had entered, or ever could enter, Miss Bygrave's mind. Noel Vanstone returned to the subject nevertheless, again and again, with his customary pertinacity. Would it be indiscreet if he asked leave to set himself right personally with Miss Bygrave? Was there any hope that he might have the happiness of seeing her on that day? or, if not, on the next day? or, if not, on the day after? Captain Wragge answered cautiously: he felt the importance of not rousing Noel Vanstone's distrust by too great an alacrity in complying with his wishes.

'An interview to-day, my dear sir, is out of the question,' he said. 'She is not well enough; she wants repose. To-morrow I propose taking her out, before the heat of the day begins—not merely to avoid embarrassment, after what has happened with Mrs. Lecount—but because the morning air, and the morning quiet, are essential in these nervous cases. We are early people here—we shall start at seven o'clock. If you are early too, and if you would like to join us, I need hardly say that we can feel no objection to your company on our morning walk. The hour, I am aware, is an unusual one—but, later in the day, my niece may be resting on the sofa, and may not be able to see visitors.'

Having made this proposal, purely for the purpose of enabling Noel Vanstone to escape to North Shingles at an hour in the morning when his housekeeper would be probably in bed, Captain Wragge left him to take the hint, if he could, as indirectly as it had been given. He proved sharp enough (the case being one in which his own

interests were concerned) to close with the proposal on the spot. Politely declaring that he was always an early man when the morning presented any special attraction to him, he accepted the appointment for seven o'clock; and rose soon afterwards to take his leave.

'One word at parting,' said Captain Wragge. 'This conversation is entirely between ourselves. Mrs. Lecount must know nothing of the impression she has produced on my niece. I have only mentioned it to you, to account for my apparently churlish conduct, and to satisfy your own mind. In confidence, Mr. Vanstone—strictly in confidence. Good morning!'

With these parting words, the captain bowed his visitor out. Unless some unexpected disaster occurred, he now saw his way safely to the end of the enterprise. He had gained two important steps in advance, that morning. He had sown the seeds of variance between the housekeeper and her master; and he had given Noel Vanstone a common interest with Magdalen and himself, in keeping a secret from Mrs. Lecount. 'We have caught our man,' thought Captain Wragge, cheerfully rubbing his hands—'We have caught our man at last!'

On leaving North Shingles, Noel Vanstone walked straight home; fully restored to his place in his own estimation, and sternly determined to carry matters with a high hand, if he found himself in collision with Mrs. Lecount.

The housekeeper received her master at the door with her mildest manner, and her gendest smile. She addressed him with downcast eyes; she opposed to his contemplated assertion of independence a barrier of impenetrable respect.

'May I venture to ask, sir,' she began, 'if your visit to North Shingles has led you to form the same conclusion as mine on the subject of Miss Bygrave's illness?'

'Certainly not, Lecount. I consider your conclusion to have been both hasty and prejudiced.'

'I am sorry to hear it, sir. I felt hurt by Mr. Bygrave's rude reception of me—but I was not aware that my judgment was prejudiced by it. Perhaps he received *you*, sir, with a warmer welcome?'

'He received me like a gentleman—that is all I think it necessary to say, Lecount—he received me like a gentleman.'

This answer satisfied Mrs. Lecount on the one doubtful point that had perplexed her. Whatever Mr. Bygrave's sudden coolness towards herself might mean, his polite reception of her master implied that the risk of detection had not daunted him, and that the plot was still in full progress. The housekeeper's eyes brightened: she had expressly calculated on this result. After a moment's thinking, she addressed her master with another question:

'You will probably visit Mr. Bygrave again, sir?'

'Of course I shall visit him—if I please.'

'And perhaps see Miss Bygrave, if she gets better?'

'Why not? I should be glad to know why not? Is it necessary to ask your leave first, Lecount?'

'By no means, sir. As you have often said (and as I have often agreed with you), you are master. It may surprise you to hear it, Mr. Noel—but I have a private reason for wishing that you should see Miss Bygrave again.'

Mr. Noel started a little, and looked at his housekeeper with some curiosity.

‘I have a strange fancy of my own, sir, about that young lady,’ proceeded Mrs. Lecount. ‘If you will excuse my fancy, and indulge it, you will do me a favour for which I shall be very grateful.’

‘A fancy?’ repeated her master, in growing surprise. ‘What fancy?’

‘Only this, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount.

She took from one of the neat little pockets of her apron a morsel of notepaper, carefully folded into the smallest possible compass; and respectfully placed it in Noel Vanstone’s hands.

‘If you are willing to oblige an old and faithful servant, Mr. Noel,’ she said, in a very quiet and very impressive manner, ‘you will kindly put that morsel of paper into your waistcoat-pocket; you will open and read it, for the first time, *when you are next in Miss Bygrave’s company*, and you will say nothing of what has now passed between us to any living creature, from this time to that. I promise to explain my strange request, sir, when you have done what I ask, and when your next interview with Miss Bygrave has come to an end.’

She curtseyed with her best grace and quietly left the room.

Noel Vanstone looked from the folded paper to the door, and from the door back to the folded paper, in unutterable astonishment. A mystery in his own house! under his own nose! What did it mean?

It meant that Mrs. Lecount had not wasted her time that morning. While the captain was casting the net over his visitor at North Shingles, the housekeeper was steadily mining the ground under his feet. The folded paper contained nothing less than a carefully-written extract from the personal description of Magdalen in Miss Garth’s letter. With a daring ingenuity which even Captain Wragge might have envied, Mrs. Lecount had found her instrument for exposing the conspiracy, in the unsuspecting person of the victim himself!

Chapter VII

Late that evening, when Magdalen and Mrs. Wragge came back from their walk in the dark, the captain stopped Magdalen on her way up-stairs, to inform her of the proceedings of the day. He added the expression of his opinion that the time had come for bringing Noel Vanstone, with the least possible delay, to the point of making a proposal. She merely answered that she understood him, and that she would do what was required of her. Captain Wragge requested her, in that case, to oblige him by joining a walking excursion in Mr. Noel Vanstone’s company, at seven o’clock the next morning. ‘I will be ready,’ she replied. ‘Is there anything more?’ There was nothing more. Magdalen bade him good night, and returned to her own room.

She had shown the same disinclination to remain any longer than was necessary in the captain’s company, throughout the three days of her seclusion in the house.

During all that time, instead of appearing to weary of Mrs. Wragge’s society, she had patiently, almost eagerly, associated herself with her companion’s one absorbing pursuit. She who had often chafed and fretted in past days, under the monotony of her life in the freedom of Combe-Raven, now accepted without a murmur, the monotony of her life at Mrs. Wragge’s work-table. She who had hated the sight of her needle and thread, in old times—who had never yet worn an article of dress of her own making—now toiled as anxiously over the making of Mrs. Wragge’s gown, and bore as patiently with Mrs. Wragge’s blunders, as if the sole object of her existence had been the successful completion of that one dress. Anything was welcome to her—the trivial

difficulties of fitting a gown: the small ceaseless chatter of the poor half-witted creature who was so proud of her assistance, and so happy in her company—anything was welcome that shut her out from the coming future, from the destiny to which she stood self-condemned. That sorely-wounded nature was soothed by such a trifle now as the grasp of her companion's rough and friendly hand—that desolate heart was cheered, when night parted them, by Mrs. Wragge's kiss.

The captain's isolated position in the house, produced no depressing effect on the captain's easy and equal spirits. Instead of resenting Magdalen's systematic avoidance of his society, he looked to results, and highly approved of it. The more she neglected him for his wife, the more directly useful she became in the character of Mrs. Wragge's self-appointed guardian. He had more than once seriously contemplated revoking the concession which had been extorted from him, and removing his wife at his own sole responsibility, out of harm's way; and he had only abandoned the idea, on discovering that Magdalen's resolution to keep Mrs. Wragge in her own company was really serious. While the two were together, his main anxiety was set at rest. They kept their door locked by his own desire, while he was out of the house, and, whatever Mrs. Wragge might do, Magdalen was to be trusted not to open it until he came back. That night, Captain Wragge enjoyed his cigar with a mind at ease; and sipped his brandy and water in happy ignorance of the pitfall which Mrs. Lecount had prepared for him in the morning.

Punctually at seven o'clock, Noel Vanstone made his appearance. The moment he entered the room, Captain Wragge detected a change in his visitor's look and manner. 'Something wrong!' thought the captain. 'We have not done with Mrs. Lecount yet.'

'How is Miss Bygrave this morning?' asked Noel Vanstone. 'Well enough, I hope, for our early walk?' His half-closed eyes, weak and watery with the morning light and the morning air, looked about the room furtively, and he shifted his place in a resdess manner from one chair to another, as he made those polite inquiries.

'My niece is better—she is dressing for the walk,' replied the captain, steadily observing his resdess little friend while he spoke. 'Mr. Vanstone!' he added, on a sudden, 'I am a plain Englishman—excuse my blunt way of speaking my mind. You don't meet me this morning as cordially as you met me yesterday. There is something unsetded in your face. I distrust that housekeeper of yours, sir! Has she been presuming on your forbearance? Has she been trying to poison your mind against me or my niece?'

If Noel Vanstone had obeyed Mrs. Lecount's injunctions, and had kept her litde morsel of note-paper folded in his pocket until the time came to use it, Captain Wragge's designedly blunt appeal might not have found him unprepared with an answer. But curiosity had got the better of him—he had opened the note at night, and again in the morning—it had seriously perplexed and startled him—and it had left his mind far too disturbed to allow him the possession of his ordinary resources. He hesitated; and his answer, when he succeeded in making it, began with a prevarication.

Captain Wragge stopped him before he had got beyond his first sentence.

'Pardon me, sir,' said the captain in his loftiest manner. 'If you have secrets to keep, you have only to say so, and I have done. I intrude on no man's secrets. At the same time, Mr. Vanstone, you must allow me to recall to your memory that I met you yesterday without any reserves on my side. I admitted you to my frankest and fullest confidence, sir—and, highly as I prize the advantages of your society, I can't consent to cultivate your friendship on any other than equal terms.' He threw open his respectable frock-coat, and surveyed his visitor with a manly and virtuous severity.

'I mean no offence!' cried Noel Vanstone, piteously. 'Why do you interrupt me, Mr. Bygrave? Why don't you

let me explain? I mean no offence.'

'No offence is taken, sir,' said the captain. 'You have a perfect right to the exercise of your own discretion. I am not offended—I only claim for myself the same privilege which I accord to you.' He rose with great dignity and rang the bell. 'Tell Miss Bygrave,' he said to the servant, 'that our walk this morning is put off until another opportunity, and that I won't trouble her to come down stairs.'

This strong proceeding had the desired effect. Noel Vanstone vehemently pleaded for a moment's private conversation before the message was delivered. Captain Wragge's severity partially relaxed. He sent the servant down stairs again; and, resuming his chair, waited confidently for results. In calculating the facilities for practising on his visitor's weakness, he had one great superiority over Mrs. Lecount. His judgment was not warped by latent female jealousies; and he avoided the error into which the housekeeper had fallen, self-deluded—the error of underrating the impression on Noel Vanstone that Magdalen had produced. One of the forces in this world which no middle-aged woman is capable of estimating at its full value, when it acts against her—is the force of beauty in a woman younger than herself.

'You are so hasty, Mr. Bygrave—you won't give me time—you won't wait and hear what I have to say!' cried Noel Vanstone, piteously, when the servant had closed the parlour door.

'My family failing, sir—the blood of the Bygraves. Accept my excuses. We are alone, as you wished; pray proceed.'

Placed between the alternatives of losing Magdalen's society or betraying Mrs. Lecount—unenlightened by any suspicion of the housekeeper's ultimate object; cowed by the immovable scrutiny of Captain Wragge's inquiring eye—Noel Vanstone was not long in making his choice. He confusedly described his singular interview of the previous evening with Mrs. Lecount; and taking the folded paper from his pocket, placed it in the captain's hand.

A suspicion of the truth dawned on Captain Wragge's mind, the moment he saw the mysterious note. He withdrew to the window before he opened it. The first lines that attracted his attention were these:—'Oblige me, Mr. Noel, by comparing the young lady who is now in your company, with the personal description which follows these lines, and which has been communicated to me by a friend. You shall know the name of the person described—which I have left a blank—as soon as the evidence of your own eyes has forced you to believe, what you would refuse to credit on the unsupported testimony of Virginie Lecount.'

That was enough for the captain. Before he had read a word of the description itself, he knew what Mrs. Lecount had done, and felt with a profound sense of humiliation, that his female enemy had taken him by surprise.

There was no time to think; the whole enterprise was threatened with irrevocable overthrow. The one resource, in Captain Wragge's present situation, was to act instantly on the first impulse of his own audacity. Line by line he read on—and still the ready inventiveness which had never deserted him yet, failed to answer the call made on it now. He came to the closing sentence—to the last words which mentioned the two little moles on Magdalen's neck. At that crowning point of the description, an idea crossed his mind—his parti-coloured eyes twinkled; his curly lips twisted up at the corners—Wragge was himself again.

He wheeled round suddenly from the window; and looked Noel Vanstone straight in the face, with a grimly-quiet suggestiveness of something serious to come.

'Pray, sir, do you happen to know anything of Mrs. Lecount's family?' he inquired.

‘A respectable family,’ said Noel Vanstone—‘that’s all I know. Why do you ask?’

‘I am not usually a betting man,’ pursued Captain Wragge. ‘But on this occasion, I will lay you any wager you like, there is madness in your housekeeper’s family.’

‘Madness!’ repeated Noel Vanstone, amazedly.

‘Madness!’ reiterated the captain, sternly tapping the note with his forefinger. ‘I see die cunning of insanity, the suspicion of insanity, the feline treachery of insanity in every line of this deplorable document. There is a far more alarming reason, sir, than I had supposed for Mrs. Lecount’s behaviour to my niece. It is clear to me, that Miss Bygrave resembles some other lady who has seriously offended your housekeeper—who has been formerly connected, perhaps, with an outbreak of insanity in your housekeeper—and who is now evidently confused with my niece, in your housekeeper’s wandering mind. That is my conviction, Mr. Vanstone. I may be right, or I may be wrong. All I say is this—neither you, nor any man, can assign a sane motive for the production of that incomprehensible document, and for the use which you are requested to make of it.’

‘I don’t think Lecount’s mad,’ said Noel Vanstone, with a very blank look, and a very discomposed manner. ‘It couldn’t have escaped me—with my habits of observation—it couldn’t possibly have escaped me if Lecount had been mad.’

‘Very good, my dear sir. In my opinion she is the subject of an insane delusion. In your opinion she is in possession of her senses, and has some mysterious motive which neither you nor I can fathom. Either way, there can be no harm in putting Mrs. Lecount’s description to the test, not only as a matter of curiosity, but for our own private satisfaction on both sides. It is of course impossible to tell my niece that she is to be made the subject of such a preposterous experiment as that note of yours suggests. But you can use your own eyes, Mr. Vanstone; you can keep your own counsel; and—mad or not—you can at least tell your housekeeper, on the testimony of your own senses, that she is wrong. Let me look at the description again. The greater part of it is not worth two straws for any purpose of identification; hundreds of young ladies have tall figures, fair complexions, light brown hair, and light grey eyes. You will say, on the other hand, hundreds of young ladies have not got two little moles close together on the left side of the neck. Quite true. The moles supply us with what we scientific men call, a Crucial Test. When my niece comes down stairs, sir, you have my full permission to take the liberty of looking at her neck.’

Noel Vanstone expressed his high approval of the Crucial Test, by smirking and simpering for the first time that morning.

‘Of looking at her neck,’ repeated the captain; returning the note to his visitor, and then making for the door. ‘I will go up-stairs myself, Mr. Vanstone,’ he continued, ‘and inspect Miss Bygrave’s walking dress. If she has innocently placed any obstacles in your way—if her hair is a little too low, or her frill is a little too high—I will exert my authority, on the first harmless pretext I can think of, to have those obstacles removed. All I ask is, that you will choose your opportunity discreetly, and that you will not allow my niece to suppose that her neck is the object of a gentleman’s inspection.’

The moment he was out of the parlour, Captain Wragge ascended the stairs at the top of his speed, and knocked at Magdalen’s door. She opened it to him, in her walking dress—obedient to the signal agreed on between them which summoned her down-stairs.

‘What have you done with your paints and powders?’ asked the captain, without wasting a word in preliminary explanations. ‘They were not in the box of costumes which I sold for you at Birmingham. Where are they?’

‘I have got them here,’ replied Magdalen. ‘What can you possibly mean by wanting them now?’

‘Bring them instantly into my dressing-room—the whole collection, brushes, palette, and everything. Don’t waste time in asking questions; I’ll tell you what has happened as we go on. Every moment is precious to us. Follow me instantly!’

His face plainly showed that there was a serious reason for his strange proposal. Magdalen secured her collection of cosmetics, and followed him into the dressing-room. He locked the door, placed her on a chair close to the light, and then told her what had happened.

‘We are on the brink of detection,’ proceeded the captain, carefully mixing his colours with liquid glue, and with a strong ‘drier’ added from a bottle in his own possession. ‘There is only one chance for us (lift up your hair from the left side of your neck)—I have told Mr. Noel Vanstone to take a private opportunity of looking at you; and I am going to give the lie direct to that she-devil Lecount, by painting out your moles.’

‘They can’t be painted out,’ said Magdalen. ‘No colour will stop on them.’

‘My colour will,’ remarked Captain Wragge. ‘I have tried a variety of professions in my time—the profession of painting among the rest. Did you ever hear of such a thing as a Black Eye? I lived some months once in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane, entirely on Black Eyes. My flesh-colour stood on bruises of all sorts, shades, and sizes—and it will stand, I promise you, on your moles.’

With this assurance, the captain dipped his brush into a tittle lump of opaque colour, which he had mixed in a saucer, and which he had graduated, as nearly as the materials would permit, to the colour of Magdalen’s skin. After first passing a cambric handkerchief with some white powder on it, over the part of her neck on which he designed to operate, he placed two layers of colour on the moles, with the tip of the brush. The process was performed in a few moments—and the moles, as if by magic, disappeared from view. Nothing but the closest inspection could have discovered the artifice by which they had been concealed: at the distance of two or three feet only, it was perfectly invisible.

‘Wait here, five minutes,’ said Captain Wragge, ‘to let the paint dry—and then join us in the parlour. Mrs. Lecount herself would be puzzled, if she looked at you now.’

‘Stop!’ said Magdalen. ‘There is one thing you have not told me yet. How did Mrs. Lecount get the description which you read downstairs? Whatever else she has seen of me, she has not seen the mark on my neck—it is too far back, and too high up; my hair hides it.’

‘Who knows of the mark?’ asked Captain Wragge.

She turned deadly pale under the anguish of a sudden recollection of Frank.

‘My sister knows it,’ she said faintly.

‘Mrs. Lecount may have written to your sister,’ suggested the captain.

‘Do you think my sister would tell a stranger what no stranger has a right to know? Never! never!’

‘Is there nobody else who could tell Mrs. Lecount? The mark was mentioned in the handbills at York. Who put it there?’

‘Not Norah! Perhaps Mr. Pendril. Perhaps Miss Garth.’

‘Then Mrs. Lecount has written to Mr. Pendril or Miss Garth—more likely to Miss Garth. The governess would be easier to deal with than the lawyer.’

‘What can she have said to Miss Garth?’

Captain Wragge considered a little.

‘I can’t say what Mrs. Lecount may have written,’ he said; ‘but I can tell you what I should have written in Mrs. Lecount’s place. I should have frightened Miss Garth by false reports about you, to begin with—and then I should have asked for personal particulars, to help a benevolent stranger in restoring you to your friends.’

The angry glitter flashed up instantly in Magdalen’s eyes.

‘What *you* would have done, is what Mrs. Lecount has done,’ she said indignantly. ‘Neither lawyer, nor governess, shall dispute my right to my own will, and my own way. If Miss Garth thinks she can control my actions by corresponding with Mrs. Lecount—I will show Miss Garth she is mistaken! It is high time, Captain Wragge, to have done with these wretched risks of discovery. We will take the short way to the end we have in view, sooner than Mrs. Lecount or Miss Garth think for. How long can you give me to wring an offer of marriage out of that creature down-stairs?’

‘I dare not give you long,’ replied Captain Wragge. ‘Now your friends know where you are, they may come down on us at a day’s notice. Could you manage it in a week?’

‘I’ll manage it in half the time,’ she said, with a hard, defiant laugh. ‘Leave us together this morning as you left us at Dunwich—and take Mrs. Wragge with you, as an excuse for parting company. Is the paint dry yet? Go down-stairs, and tell him I am coming directly.’

So, for the second time, Miss Garth’s well-meant efforts defeated their own end. So, the fatal force of circumstance turned the hand that would fain have held Magdalen back, into the hand that drove her on.

The captain returned to his visitor in the parlour—after first stopping on the way, to issue his orders for the walking excursion to Mrs. Wragge.

‘I am shocked to have kept you waiting,’ he said, sitting down again confidentially by Noel Vanstone’s side. ‘My only excuse is, that my niece had accidentally dressed her hair, so as to defeat our object. I have been persuading her to alter it—and young ladies are apt to be a little obstinate on questions relating to their toilette. Give her a chair on that side of you, when she comes in—and take your look at her neck comfortably, before we start for our walk.’

Magdalen entered the room, as he said those words—and, after the first greetings were exchanged, took the chair presented to her with the most unsuspicious readiness. Noel Vanstone applied the Crucial Test on the spot—with the highest appreciation of the fair material which was the subject of experiment. Not the vestige of a mole was visible on any part of the smooth white surface of Miss Bygrave’s neck. It mutely answered the blinking inquiry of Noel Vanstone’s half-closed eyes, by the flattest practical contradiction of Mrs. Lecount. That one central incident in the events of the morning, was of all of the incidents that had hitherto occurred, the most important in its results. That one discovery shook the housekeeper’s hold on her master, as nothing had shaken it yet.

In a few minutes, Mrs. Wragge made her appearance, and excited as much surprise in Noel Vanstone’s mind as he was capable of feeling, while absorbed in the enjoyment of Magdalen’s society. The walking party left the house at once; directing their steps northward, so as not to pass the windows of Sea View Cottage. To Mrs.

Wragge's unutterable astonishment, her husband, for the first time in the course of their married life, politely offered her his arm, and led her on, in advance of the young people, as if the privilege of walking alone with her presented some special attraction to him! 'Step out!' whispered the captain, fiercely. 'Leave your niece and Mr. Vanstone alone! If I catch you looking back at them, I'll put the Oriental Cashmere Robe on the top of the kitchen fire! Turn your toes out, and keep step—confound you, keep step!' Mrs. Wragge kept step to the best of her limited ability. Her sturdy knees trembled under her. She firmly believed the captain was intoxicated.

The walk lasted for rather more than an hour. Before nine o'clock they were all back again at North Shingles. The ladies went at once into the house. Noel Vanstone remained with Captain Wragge in the garden.

'Well,' said the captain, 'what do you think now of Mrs. Lecount?'

'Damn Lecount!' replied Noel Vanstone, in great agitation. 'I'm half inclined to agree with you. I'm half inclined to think my infernal housekeeper is mad.'

He spoke fretfully and unwillingly, as if the merest allusion to Mrs. Lecount was distasteful to him. His colour came and went; his manner was absent and undecided; he fidgeted resdessly about the garden walk. It would have been plain to a far less acute observation than Captain Wragge's, that Magdalen had met his advances by an unexpected grace and readiness of encouragement, which had entirely overthrown his self-control.

'I never enjoyed a walk so much in my life!' he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst of enthusiasm. 'I hope Miss Bygrave feels all the better for it. Do you go out at the same time to-morrow morning? May I join you again?'

'By all means, Mr. Vanstone,' said the captain, cordially. 'Excuse me for returning to the subject—but what do you propose saying to Mrs. Lecount?'

'I don't know. Lecount is a perfect nuisance! What would you do, Mr. Bygrave, if you were in my place?'

'Allow me to ask a question, my dear sir, before I tell you. What is your breakfast hour?'

'Half-past nine.'

'Is Mrs. Lecount an early riser?'

'No. Lecount is lazy in the morning. I hate lazy women! If you were in my place, what should you say to her?'

'I should say nothing,' replied Captain Wragge. 'I should return at once by the back way; I should let Mrs. Lecount see me in the front garden, as if I was taking a turn before breakfast; and I should leave her to suppose that I was only just out of my room. If she asks you whether you mean to come here to-day, say No. Secure a quiet life, until circumstances force you to give her an answer. Then tell the plain truth—say that Mr. Bygrave's niece and Mrs. Lecount's description are at variance with each other in the most important particular; and beg that the subject may not be mentioned again. There is my advice. What do you think of it?'

If Noel Vanstone could have looked into his counsellor's mind, he might have thought the captain's advice excellently adapted to serve the captain's interests. As long as Mrs. Lecount could be kept in ignorance of her master's visits to North Shingles—so long she would wait until the opportunity came for trying her experiment; and so long she might be trusted not to endanger the conspiracy by any further proceedings. Necessarily incapable of viewing Captain Wragge's advice under this aspect, Noel Vanstone simply looked at it, as offering him a temporary means of escape from an explanation with his housekeeper. He eagerly declared that the course of action suggested to him should be followed to the letter, and returned to Sea View without further delay.

On this occasion, Captain Wragge's anticipations were in no respect falsified by Mrs. Lecount's conduct. She had no suspicion of her master's visit to North Shingles—she had made up her mind, if necessary, to wait patiently for his interview with Miss Bygrave, until the end of the week—and she did not embarrass him by any unexpected questions, when he announced his intention of holding no personal communication with the Bygraves on that day. All she said was, 'Don't you feel well enough, Mr. Noel? or don't you feel inclined?' He answered, shortly, 'I don't feel well enough;' and there the conversation ended.

The next day, the proceedings of the previous morning were exactly repeated. This time, Noel Vanstone went home rapturously with a keepsake in his breast-pocket—he had taken tender possession of one of Miss Bygrave's gloves. At intervals during the day, whenever he was alone, he took out the glove, and kissed it with a devotion which was almost passionate in its fervour. The miserable little creature luxuriated in his moments of stolen happiness, with a speechless and stealthy delight which was a new sensation to him. The few young girls whom he had met with, in his father's narrow circle at Zurich, had felt a mischievous pleasure in treating him like a quaint little plaything; the strongest impression he could make on their hearts was an impression in which their lap-dogs might have rivalled him; the deepest interest he could create in them, was the interest they might have felt in a new trinket or a new dress. The only women who had hitherto invited his admiration, and taken his compliments seriously, had been women whose charms were on the wane, and whose chances of marriage were fast failing them. For the first time in his life, he had now passed hours of happiness in the society of a beautiful girl, who had left him to think of her afterwards without a single humiliating remembrance to lower him in his own esteem.

Anxiously as he tried to hide it, the change produced in his look and manner by the new feeling awakened in him, was not a change which could be concealed from Mrs. Lecount. On the second day, she pointedly asked him whether he had not made an arrangement to call on the Bygraves. He denied it as before. 'Perhaps you are going to-morrow, Mr. Noel?' persisted the housekeeper. He was at the end of his resources; he was impatient to be rid of her inquiries; he trusted to his friend at North Shingles to help him—and, this time, he answered, Yes. 'If you see the young lady,' proceeded Mrs. Lecount, 'don't forget that note of mine, sir, which you have in your waistcoat-pocket.' No more was said on either side—but by that night's post, the housekeeper wrote to Miss Garth. The letter merely acknowledged, with thanks, the receipt of Miss Garth's communication; and informed her that, in a few days, Mrs. Lecount hoped to be in a position to write again, and summon Mr. Pendril to Aldborough.

Late in the evening, when the parlour at North Shingles began to get dark, and when the captain rang the bell for candles, as usual, he was surprised by hearing Magdalen's voice in the passage, telling the servant to take the lights down-stairs again. She knocked at the door immediately afterwards; and glided into the obscurity of the room, like a ghost.

'I have a question to ask you about your plans for to-morrow,' she said. 'My eyes are very weak this evening, and I hope you will not object to dispense with the candles for a few minutes.'

She spoke in low stifled tones, and felt her way noiselessly to a chair far removed from the captain in the darkest part of the room. Sitting near the window, he could just discern the dim outline of her dress, he could just hear the faint accents of her voice. For the last two days he had seen nothing of her, except during their morning walk. On that afternoon, he had found his wife crying in the litde back room down-stairs. She could only tell him that Magdalen had frightened her—that Magdalen was going the way again which she had gone when the letter came from China in the terrible past time at Vauxhall Walk.

'I was sorry to hear that you were ill to-day, from Mrs. Wragge,' said the captain, unconsciously dropping his voice almost to a whisper as he spoke.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she answered quietly, out of the darkness. ‘I am strong enough to suffer, and live. Other girls, in my place, would have been happier—they would have suffered, and died. It doesn’t matter; it will be all the same a hundred years hence. Is he coming again to-morrow morning, at seven o’clock?’

‘He is coming, if you feel no objection to it?’

‘I have no objection to make; I have done with objecting. But I should like to have the time altered. I don’t look my best in the early morning—I have bad nights, and I rise haggard and worn. Write him a note this evening, and tell him to come at twelve o’clock.’

‘Twelve is rather late, under the circumstances, for you to be seen out walking.’

‘I have no intention of walking. Let him be shown into the parlour———’

Her voice died away in silence, before she ended the sentence.

‘Yes?’ said Captain Wragge.

‘And leave me alone in the parlour to receive him.’

‘I understand,’ said the captain. ‘An admirable idea. I’ll be out of the way, in the dining-room, while he is here—and you can come and tell me about it when he has gone.’

There was another moment of silence.

‘Is there no way but telling you?’ she asked suddenly. I can control myself while he is with me—but I can’t answer for what I may say or do, afterwards. Is there no other way?’

‘Plenty of ways,’ said the captain. ‘Here is the first that occurs to me. Leave the blind down over the window of your room up-stairs, before he comes. I will go out on the beach, and wait there within sight of the house. When I see him come out again, I will look at the window. If he has said nothing, leave the blind down. If he has made you an offer—draw the blind up. The signal is simplicity itself; we can’t misunderstand each other. Look your best to-morrow! Make sure of him, my dear girl—make sure of him, if you possibly can.’

He had spoken loud enough to feel certain that she had heard him—but no answering word came from her. The dead silence was only disturbed by the rustling of her dress, which told him she had risen from her chair. Her shadowy presence crossed the room again; the door shut softly—she was gone. He rang the bell hurriedly for the lights. The servant found him standing close at the window—looking less self-possessed than usual. He told her he felt a little poorly, and sent her to the cupboard for the brandy.

At a few minutes before twelve, the next day, Captain Wragge withdrew to his post of observation—concealing himself behind a fishing-boat drawn up on the beach. Punctually as the hour struck, he saw Noel Vanstone approach North Shingles, and open the garden gate. When the house door had closed on the visitor, Captain Wragge settled himself comfortably against the side of the boat, and lit his cigar.

He smoked for half an hour—for ten minutes over the half-hour, by his watch. He finished the cigar down to the last morsel of it that he could hold in his lips. Just as he had thrown away the end, the door opened again; and Noel Vanstone came out.

The captain looked up instantly at Magdalen’s window. In the absorbing excitement of the moment, he counted the seconds. She might get from the parlour to her own room in less than a minute. He counted to thirty—and nothing happened. He counted to fifty—and nothing happened. He gave up counting, and left the boat

impatiently, to return to the house.

As he took his first step forward he saw the signal.

The blind was drawn up.

Cautiously ascending the eminence of the beach, Captain Wragge looked towards Sea View Cottage, before he showed himself on the Parade. Noel Vanstone had reached home again: he was just entering his own door.

'If all your money was offered me to stand in your shoes,' said the captain, looking after him—'rich as you a^, I wouldn't take it!'———.

Chapter VIII

On returning to the house, Captain Wragge received a significant message from the servant. 'Mr. Noel Vanstone would call again at two o'clock, that afternoon: when he hoped to have the pleasure of finding Mr. Bygrave at home.'

The captain's first inquiry, after hearing this message, referred to Magdalen. 'Where was Miss Bygrave?' 'In her own room.' 'Where was Mrs. Bygrave?' 'In the back parlour.' Captain Wragge turned his steps at once in the latter direction; and found his wife, for the second time, in tears. She had been sent out of Magdalen's room, for the whole day; and she was at her wits' end to know what she had done to deserve it. Shortening her lamentations without ceremony, her husband sent her up-stairs on the spot; with instructions to knock at the door, and to inquire whether Magdalen could give five minutes' attention to a question of importance, which must be settled before two o'clock.

The answer returned was in the negative. Magdalen requested that the subject on which she was asked to decide might be mentioned to her in writing. She engaged to reply in the same way—on the understanding that Mrs. Wragge, and not the servant, should be employed to deliver the note, and to take back the answer.

Captain Wragge forthwith opened his paper-case, and wrote these lines:—'Accept my warmest congratulations on the result of your interview with Mr. N. V. He is coming again at two o'clock; no doubt to make his proposals in due form. The question to decide is, whether I shall press him or not on the subject of settlements.* The considerations for your own mind are two in number. First, whether the said pressure (without at all underrating your influence over him) may not squeeze for a long time, before it squeezes money out of Mr. N. V. Secondly, whether we are altogether justified—considering our present position towards a certain sharp practitioner in petticoats—in running the risk of delay. Consider these points, and let me have your decision as soon as convenient.'

The answer returned to this note was written in crooked blotted characters, strangely unlike Magdalen's usually firm and clear handwriting. It only contained these words:—'Give yourself no trouble about settlements. Leave the use to which he is to put his money for the future, in my hands.'

'Did you see her?' asked the captain, when his wife had delivered the answer.

'I tried,' said Mrs. Wragge, with a fresh burst of tears—'but she only opened the door far enough to put out her hand. I took and gave it a little squeeze—and, oh poor soul, it felt so cold in mine!'

When Mrs. Lecount's master made his appearance at two o'clock, he stood alarmingly in need of an anodyne application from Mrs. Lecount's green fan. The agitation of making his avowal to Magdalen; the terror of finding himself discovered by the housekeeper; the tormenting suspicion of the hard pecuniary conditions which Magdalen's relative and guardian might impose on him—all these emotions, stirring in conflict together, had overpowered his feebly-working heart with a trial that strained it sorely. He gasped for breath, as he sat down in the parlour at North Shingles; and that ominous bluish pallor which always overspread his face in moments of agitation, now made its warning appearance again. Captain Wragge seized the brandy bottle, in genuine alarm; and forced his visitor to drink a wine-glassful of the spirit, before a word was said between them on either side.

Restored by the stimulant, and encouraged by the readiness with which the captain anticipated everything that he had to say, Noel Vanstone contrived to state the serious object of his visit, in tolerably plain terms. All the conventional preliminaries proper to the occasion were easily disposed of. The suitor's family was respectable; his position in life was undeniably satisfactory; his attachment, though hasty, was evidently disinterested and sincere. All that Captain Wragge had to do was to refer to these various considerations with a happy choice of language, in a voice that trembled with manly emotion—and this he did to perfection. For the first half-hour of the interview, no allusion whatever was made to the delicate and dangerous part of the subject. The captain waited, until he had composed his visitor; and when that result was achieved, came smoothly to the point in these terms:

'There is one little difficulty, Mr. Vanstone, which I think we have both overlooked. Your housekeeper's recent conduct inclines me to fear that she will view the approaching change in your life with anything but a friendly eye. Probably, you have not thought it necessary yet to inform her of the new tie which you propose to form?'

Noel Vanstone turned pale at the bare idea of explaining himself to Mrs. Lecount.

'I can't tell what I'm to do,' he said, glancing aside nervously at the window, as if he expected to see the housekeeper peeping in. 'I hate all awkward positions; and this is the most unpleasant position I ever was placed in. You don't know what a terrible woman Lecount is. I'm not afraid of her; pray don't suppose I'm afraid of her———'

At those words, his fears rose in his throat, and gave him the lie direct by stopping his utterance.

'Pray don't trouble yourself to explain,' said Captain Wragge, coming to the rescue. 'This is the common story, Mr. Vanstone. Here is a woman who has grown old in your service, and in your father's service before you; a woman who has contrived, in all sorts of small underhand ways, to presume systematically on her position for years and years past; a woman, in short, whom your inconsiderate but perfectly natural kindness, has allowed to claim a right of property in you———'

'Property!' cried Noel Vanstone, mistaking the captain, and letting the truth escape him through sheer inability to conceal his fears any longer. 'I don't know what amount of property she won't claim. She'll make me pay for my father as well as for myself. Thousands, Mr. Bygrave—thousands of pounds sterling out of my pocket!!!' He clasped his hands in despair at the picture of pecuniary compulsion, which his fancy had conjured up—his own golden life-blood spouting from him in great jets of prodigality under the lancet of Mrs. Lecount!

'Gently, Mr. Vanstone—gently! The woman knows nothing so far, and the money is not gone yet.'

'No, no; the money is not gone, as you say. I'm only nervous about it; I can't help being nervous. You were saying something just now; you were going to give me advice. I value your advice—you don't know how highly I value your advice.' He said those words with a conciliatory smile, which was more than helpless: it was absolutely servile in its dependence on his judicious friend.

‘I was only assuring you, my dear sir, that I understood your position,’ said the captain. ‘I see your difficulty as plainly as you can see it yourself. Tell a woman like Mrs. Lecount that she must come off her domestic throne, to make way for a young and beautiful successor, armed with the authority of a wife; and an unpleasant scene must be the inevitable result. An unpleasant scene, Mr. Vanstone, if your opinion of your housekeeper’s sanity is well founded. Something far more serious, if my opinion that her intellect is unsettled, happens to turn out the right one.’

‘I don’t say it isn’t my opinion too,’ rejoined Noel Vanstone. ‘Especially after what has happened to-day.’

Captain Wragge immediately begged to know what the event alluded to might be.

Noel Vanstone, thereupon, explained—with an infinite number of parentheses, all referring to himself—that Mrs. Lecount had put the dreaded question relating to the little note in her master’s pocket, barely an hour since. He had answered her inquiry as Mr. Bygrave had advised him. On hearing that the accuracy of the personal description had been fairly put to the test, and had failed in the one important particular of the moles on the neck, Mrs. Lecount had considered a little, and had then asked him whether he had shown her note to Mr. Bygrave, before the experiment was tried. He had answered in the negative, as the only safe form of reply that he could think of, on the spur of the moment—and the housekeeper had then addressed him in these strange and startling words: ‘You are keeping the truth from me, Mr. Noel. You are trusting strangers, and doubting your old servant and your old friend. Every time you go to Mr. Bygrave’s house, every time you see Miss Bygrave, you are drawing nearer and nearer to your destruction. They have got the bandage over your eyes in spite of me; but I tell them, and tell you, before many days sire over, I will take it off!’ To this extraordinary outbreak—accompanied, as it was, by an expression in Mrs. Lecount’s face which he had never seen there before—Noel Vanstone had made no reply. Mr. Bygrave’s conviction that there was a lurking taint of insanity in the housekeeper’s blood, had recurred to his memory, and he had left the room at the first opportunity.

Captain Wragge listened with the closest attention to the narrative thus presented to him. But one conclusion could be drawn from it—it was a plain warning to him to hasten the end.

‘I am not surprised,’ he said, gravely, ‘to hear that you are inclining more favourably to my opinion. After what you have just told me, Mr. Vanstone, no sensible man could do otherwise. This is becoming serious. I hardly know what results may not be expected to follow the communication of your approaching change in life to Mrs. Lecount. My niece may be involved in those results. She is nervous; she is sensitive in the highest degree; she is the innocent object of this woman’s unreasoning hatred and distrust. You alarm me, sir! I am not easily thrown off my balance—but I acknowledge you alarm me for the future.’ He frowned, shook his head, and looked at his visitor despondently.

Noel Vanstone began to feel uneasy. The change in Mr. Bygrave’s manner seemed ominous of a reconsideration of his proposals from a new, and unfavourable point of view. He took counsel of his inborn cowardice, and his inborn cunning; and proposed a solution of the difficulty, discovered by himself.

‘Why should we tell Lecount at all?’ he asked. ‘What right has Lecount to know? Can’t we be married, without letting her into the secret? And can’t somebody tell her afterwards, when we are both out of her reach?’

Captain Wragge received this proposal with an expression of surprise, which did infinite credit to his power of control over his own countenance. His foremost object, throughout the interview, had been to conduct it to this point—or, in other words, to make the first idea of keeping the marriage a secret from Mrs. Lecount, emanate from Noel Vanstone instead of from himself. No one knew better than the captain that the only responsibilities which a weak man ever accepts, are responsibilities which can be perpetually pointed out to him as resting

exclusively on his own shoulders.

‘I am accustomed to set my face against clandestine proceedings of all kinds,’ said Captain Wragge. ‘But there are exceptions to the strictest rules; and I am bound to admit, Mr. Vanstone, that your position in this matter is an exceptional position if ever there was one yet. The course you have just proposed—however unbecoming I may think it; however distasteful it may be to myself—would not only spare you a very serious embarrassment (to say the least of it), but would also protect you from the personal assertion of those pecuniary claims on the part of your housekeeper, to which you have already adverted. These are both desirable results to achieve—to say nothing of the removal, on my side, of all apprehension of annoyance to my niece. On the other hand, however, a marriage solemnized with such privacy as you propose, must be a hasty marriage—for, as we are situated, the longer the delay, the greater will be the risk that our secret may escape our keeping. I am not against hasty marriages, where a mutual flame is fanned by an adequate income. My own was a love-match, contracted in a hurry. There are plenty of instances in the experience of every one, of short courtships and speedy marriages, which have turned up trumps—I beg your pardon—which have turned out well, after all. But if you and my niece, Mr. Vanstone, are to add one to the number of these cases, the usual preliminaries of marriage among the higher classes must be hastened by some means. You doubtless understand me, as now referring to the subject of settlements.’

‘I’ll take another teaspoonful of brandy,’ said Noel Vanstone, holding out his glass with a trembling hand as the word ‘setdements’ passed Captain Wragge’s lips.

‘I’ll take a teaspoonful with you,’ said the captain, nimbly dismounting from the pedestal of his respectability, and sipping his brandy with the highest relish. Noel Vanstone, after nervously following his host’s example, composed himself to meet the coming ordeal, with reclining head and grasping hands—in the position familiarly associated to all civilized humanity with a seat in a dentist’s chair.

The captain put down his empty glass and got up again on his pedestal.

‘We were talking of settlements,’ he resumed. ‘I have already mentioned, Mr. Vanstone, at an early period of our conversation, that my niece presents the man of her choice with no other dowry than the most inestimable of all gifts—the gift of herself. This circumstance, however (as you are no doubt aware), does not disentitle me to make the customary stipulations with her future husband. According to the usual course in this matter, my lawyer would see yours—consultations would take place—delays would occur—strangers would be in possession of your intentions—and Mrs. Lecount would, sooner or later, arrive at that knowledge of the truth, which you are anxious to keep from her. Do you agree with me, so far?’

Unutterable apprehension closed Noel Vanstone’s lips. He could only reply by an inclination of the head.

‘Very good,’ said the captain. ‘Now, sir, you may possibly have observed that I am a man of a very original turn of mind. If I have not hitherto struck you in that light, it may then be necessary to mention that there are some subjects on which I persist in thinking for myself. The subject of marriage settlements is one of them. What, let me ask you, does a parent or guardian in my present condition usually do? After having trusted the man whom he has chosen for his son-in-law with the sacred deposit of a woman’s happiness—he turns round on that man, and declines to trust him with the infinitely inferior responsibility of providing for her pecuniary future. He fetters his son-in-law with die most binding document the law can produce; and employs with the husband of his own child, the same precautions which he would use if he were dealing with a stranger and a rogue. I call such conduct as this, inconsistent and unbecoming in the last degree. You will not find it my course of conduct, Mr. Vanstone—you will not find me preaching what I don’t practise. If I trust you with my niece, I trust you with every inferior responsibility towards her and towards me. Give me your hand, sir—tell me on your word of

honour that you will provide for your wife, as becomes her position and your means—and the question of settlements is decided between us from this moment, at once and for ever!' Having carried out Magdalen's instructions in this lofty tone, he threw open his respectable frock-coat, and sat with head erect, and hand extended, the model of parental feeling, and the picture of human integrity.

For one moment, Noel Vanstone remained literally petrified by astonishment. The next, he started from his chair and wrung the hand of his magnanimous friend, in a perfect transport of admiration. Never yet, throughout his long and varied career, had Captain Wragge felt such difficulty in keeping his countenance, as he felt now. Contempt for the outburst of miserly gratitude of which he was the object; triumph in the sense of successful conspiracy against a man who had rated the offer of his protection at five pounds; regret at the lost opportunity of effecting a fine stroke of moral agriculture, which his dread of involving himself in coming consequences had forced him to let slip—all these varied emotions agitated the captain's mind; all strove together to find their way to the surface, through the outlets of his face or his tongue. He allowed Noel Vanstone to keep possession of his hand, and to heap one series of shrill protestations and promises on another, until he had regained his usual mastery over himself. That result achieved, he put the little man back in his chair, and returned forthwith to the subject of Mrs. Lecount.

'Suppose we now revert to the difficulty which we have not conquered yet,' said the captain. 'Let us say that I do violence to my own habits and feelings; that I allow the considerations I have already mentioned to weigh with me; and that I sanction your wish to be united to my niece, without the knowledge of Mrs. Lecount. Allow me to inquire, in that case, what means you can suggest for the accomplishment of your end?'

'I can't suggest anything,' replied Noel Vanstone, helplessly. 'Would you object to suggest for me?'

'You are making a bolder request than you think, Mr. Vanstone. I never do things by halves. When I am acting with my customary candour, I am frank (as you know already) to the utmost verge of imprudence. When exceptional circumstances compel me to take an opposite course, there isn't a slyer fox alive than I am. If, at your express request, I take off my honest English coat here, and put on a Jesuit's gown—if, purely out of sympathy for your awkward position, I consent to keep your secret for you from Mrs. Lecount—I must have no unseasonable scruples to contend with on your part. If it is neck or nothing on my side, sir—it must be neck or nothing on yours also!'

'Neck or nothing by all means,' said Noel Vanstone, briskly—'on the understanding that you go first. I have no scruples about keeping Lecount in the dark. But she is devilish cunning, Mr. Bygrave. How is it to be done?'

'You shall hear directly,' replied the captain. 'Before I develop my views, I should like to have your opinion on an abstract question of morality. What do you think, my dear sir, of pious frauds in general?'

Noel Vanstone looked a litde embarrassed by the question.

'Shall I put it more plainly?' continued Captain Wragge. 'What do you say to the universally-accepted maxim, that "all stratagems are fair in love and war?"—Yes, or No?'

'Yes!' answered Noel Vanstone, with the utmost readiness.

'One more question, and I have done,' said the captain. 'Do you see any particular objection to practising a pious fraud on Mrs. Lecount?'

Noel Vanstone's resolution began to falter a little.

'Is Lecount likely to find it out?' he asked cautiously.

‘She can’t possibly discover it until you are married, and out of her reach.’

‘You are sure of that?’

‘Quite sure.’

‘Play any trick you like on Lecount,’ said Noel Vanstone, with an air of unutterable relief. ‘I have had my suspicions lately, that she is trying to domineer over me—I am beginning to feel that I have borne with Lecount long enough. I wish I was well rid of her.’

‘You shall have your wish,’ said Captain Wragge. ‘You shall be rid of her in a week or ten days.’

Noel Vanstone rose eagerly and approached the captain’s chair.

‘You don’t say so!’ he exclaimed. ‘How do you mean to send her away?’

‘I mean to send her on a journey,’ replied Captain Wragge.

‘Where?’

‘From your house at Aldborough, to her brother’s bedside at Zurich.’

Noel Vanstone started back at the answer, and returned suddenly to his chair.

‘How can you do that?’ he inquired, in the greatest perplexity. ‘Her brother (hang him!) is much better. She had another letter from Zurich to say so, this morning.’

‘Did you see the letter?’

‘Yes. She always worries about her brother—she *would* show it to me.’

‘Who was it from? and what did it say?’

‘It was from the doctor—he always writes to her. I don’t care two straws about her brother; and I don’t remember much of the letter, except that it was a short one. The fellow was much better; and if the doctor didn’t write again, she might take it for granted that he was getting well. That was the substance of it.’

‘Did you notice where she put the letter, when you gave it her back again?’

‘Yes. She put it in the drawer, where she keeps her account-books.’

‘Can you get at that drawer?’

‘Of course I can. I have got a duplicate key—I always insist on a duplicate key of the place where she keeps her account-books. I never allow the account-books to be locked up from my inspection: it’s a rule of the house.’

‘Be so good as to get that letter to-day, Mr. Vanstone, without your housekeeper’s knowledge; and add to the favour by letting me have it here privately for an hour or two.’

‘What do you want it for?’

‘I have some more questions to ask, before I can tell you. Have you any intimate friend at Zurich, whom you could trust to help you in playing a trick on Mrs Lecount?’

‘What sort of help do you mean?’ asked Noel Vanstone.

‘Suppose,’ said the captain, ‘you were to send a letter addressed to Mrs. Lecount, at Aldborough, enclosed in another letter addressed to one of your friends abroad? And suppose you were to instruct that friend to help a harmless practical joke by posting Mrs. Lecount’s letter at Zurich? Do you know any one who could be trusted to do that?’

‘I know two people who could be trusted!’ cried Noel Vanstone. ‘Both ladies—both spinsters—both bitter enemies of Lecount’s. But what is your drift, Mr. Bygrave? Though I am not usually wanting in penetration, I don’t altogether see your drift.’

‘You shall see it directly, Mr. Vanstone.’

With those words he rose, withdrew to his desk in the corner of the room, and wrote a few lines on a sheet of note-paper. After first reading them carefully to himself, he beckoned to Noel Vanstone to come and read them too.

‘A few minutes since,’ said the captain, pointing complacently to his own composition with the feather end of his pen, ‘I had the honour of suggesting a pious fraud on Mrs. Lecount. There it is!’

He resigned his chair at the writing-table to his visitor. Noel Vanstone sat down, and read these lines:

‘My Dear Madam,—Since I last wrote, I deeply regret to inform you that your brother has suffered a relapse. The symptoms are so serious, that it is my painful duty to summon you instantly to his bedside. I am making every effort to resist the renewed progress of the malady; and I have not yet lost all hope of success. But I cannot reconcile it to my conscience to leave you in ignorance of a serious change in my patient for the worse, which *may* be attended by fatal results. With much sympathy, I remain, &c. &c.’

Captain Wragge waited with some anxiety for the effect which this letter might produce. Mean, selfish, and cowardly as he was, even Noel Vanstone might feel some compunction at practising such a deception as was here suggested, on a woman who stood towards him in the position of Mrs. Lecount. She had served him faithfully, however interested her motives might be—she had lived, since he was a lad, in the full possession of his father’s confidence—she was living now under the protection of his own roof. Could he fail to remember this; and, remembering it, could he lend his aid without hesitation to the scheme which was now proposed to him? Captain Wragge unconsciously retained belief enough in human nature to doubt it. To his surprise, and, it must be added, to his relief also, his apprehensions proved to be perfectly groundless. The only emotions aroused in Noel Vanstone’s mind by a perusal of the letter, were a hearty admiration of his friend’s idea, and a vainglorious anxiety to claim the credit to himself of being the person who carried it out. Examples may be found every day of a fool who is no coward; examples may be found occasionally of a fool who is not cunning—but it may reasonably be doubted whether there is a producible instance anywhere of a fool who is not cruel.

‘Perfect!’ cried Noel Vanstone, clapping his hands. ‘Mr. Bygrave, you are as good as Figaro in the French comedy.* Talking of French, there is one serious mistake in this clever letter of yours—it is written in the wrong language. When the doctor writes to Lecount, he writes in French. Perhaps you meant me to translate it? You can’t manage without my help can you? I write French as fluently as I write English. Just look at me! I’ll translate it, while I sit here, in two strokes of the pen.’

He completed the translation almost as rapidly as Captain Wragge had produced the original. ‘Wait a minute!’ he cried, in high critical triumph at discovering another defect in the composition of his ingenious friend. ‘The doctor always dates his letters. Here is no date to yours.’

‘I leave the date to you,’ said the captain, with a sardonic smile. ‘You have discovered the fault, my dear sir—pray correct it!’

Noel Vanstone mentally looked into the great gulf which separates the faculty that can discover a defect, from the faculty that can apply a remedy—and, following the example of many a wiser man, declined to cross over it.

‘I couldn’t think of taking the liberty,’ he said, politely. ‘Perhaps you had a motive for leaving the date out?’

‘Perhaps I had,’ replied Captain Wragge, with his easiest good humour. ‘The date must depend on the time a letter takes to get to Zurich. / have had no experience on that point—*you* must have had plenty of experience in your father’s time. Give me the benefit of your information; and we will add the date before you leave the writing-table.’

Noel Vanstone’s experience was, as Captain Wragge had anticipated, perfectly competent to setde the question of time. The railway resources of the Continent (in the year eighteen hundred and forty-seven) were but scanty; and a letter sent, at that period, from England to Zurich, and from Zurich back again to England, occupied ten days in making the double journey by post.*

‘Date the letter, in French, five days on from to-morrow,’ said the captain, when he had got his information. ‘Very good. The next thing is to let me have the doctor’s note, as soon as you can. I may be obliged to practise some hours before I can copy your translation in an exact imitation of the doctor’s handwriting. Have you got any foreign note-paper? Let me have a few sheets; and send, at the same time, an envelope addressed to one of those lady-friends of yours at Zurich, accompanied by the necessary request to post the enclosure. This is all I need trouble you to do, Mr. Vanstone. Don’t let me seem inhospitable—but the sooner you can supply me with my materials, the better I shall be pleased. We entirely understand each other, I suppose? Having accepted your proposal for my niece’s hand, I sanction a private marriage in consideration of the circumstances on your side. A little harmless stratagem is necessary to forward your views. I invent the stratagem, at your request—and you make use of it without the least hesitation. The result is, that in ten days from to-morrow, Mrs. Lecount will be on her way to Switzerland—in fifteen days from to-morrow, Mrs. Lecount will reach Zurich, and discover the trick we have played her—in twenty days from to-morrow, Mrs. Lecount will be back at Aldborough, and will find her master’s wedding-cards on the table, and her master himself away on his honeymoon trip. I put it arithmetically, for the sake of putting it plain. God bless you. Good-morning!’

‘I suppose I may have the happiness of seeing Miss Bygrave to-morrow?’ said Noel Vanstone, turning round at the door.

‘We must be careful,’ replied Captain Wragge. ‘I don’t forbid to-morrow—but I make no promise beyond that. Permit me to remind you that we have got Mrs. Lecount to manage for the next ten days.’

‘I wish Lecount was at the bottom of the German Ocean!’ exclaimed Noel Vanstone, fervently. ‘It’s all very well for you to manage her—you don’t live in the house. What am I to do?’

‘I’ll tell you to-morrow,’ said the captain. ‘Go out for your walk alone, and drop in here, as you dropped in to-day, at two o’clock. In the mean time, don’t forget those things I want you to send me. Seal them up together in a large envelope. When you have done that, ask Mrs. Lecount to walk out with you as usual; and while she is up-stairs putting her bonnet on, send the servant across to me. You understand? Good-morning.’

An hour afterwards, the sealed envelope, with its enclosures, reached Captain Wragge in perfect safety. The double task of exactly imitating a strange handwriting, and accurately copying words written in a language with which he was but slightly acquainted, presented more difficulties to be overcome than the captain had

anticipated. It was eleven o'clock before the employment which he had undertaken was successfully completed, and the letter to Zurich ready for the post.

Before going to bed, he walked out on the deserted Parade, to breathe the cool night air. All the lights were extinguished in Sea View Cottage, when he looked that way—except the light in the housekeeper's window. Captain Wragge shook his head suspiciously. He had gained experience enough, by this time, to distrust the wakefulness of Mrs. Lecount.

Chapter IX

If Captain Wragge could have looked into Mrs. Lecount's room—while he stood on the Parade watching the light in her window—he would have seen the housekeeper sitting absorbed in meditation over a worthless little morsel of brown stuff, which lay on her toilet-table.

However exasperating to herself the conclusion might be, Mrs. Lecount could not fail to see that she had been thus far met and baffled successfully at every point. What was she to do next? If she sent for Mr. Pendril, when he came to Aldborough (with only a few hours spared from his business at her disposal)—what definite course would there be for him to follow? If she showed Noel Vanstone the original letter from which her note had been copied, he would apply instantly to the writer for an explanation; would expose the fabricated story by which Mrs. Lecount had succeeded in imposing on Miss Garth; and would, in any event, still declare, on the evidence of his own eyes, that the test by the marks on the neck had utterly failed. Miss Vanstone the elder, whose unexpected presence at Aldborough might have done wonders—whose voice in the hall at North Shingles, even if she had been admitted no farther, might have reached her sister's ears, and led to instant results—Miss Vanstone the elder, was out of the country, and was not likely to return for a month at least. Look as anxiously as Mrs. Lecount might along the course which she had hitherto followed, she failed to see her way through the accumulated obstacles which now barred her advance.

Other women, in this position, might have waited until circumstances altered, and helped them. Mrs. Lecount boldly retraced her steps, and determined to find her way to her end in a new direction. Resigning, for the present, all further attempt to prove that the false Miss Bygrave was the true Magdalen Vanstone—she resolved to narrow the range of her next efforts; to leave the actual question of Magdalen's identity untouched; and to rest satisfied with convincing her master of this simple fact—that the young lady who was charming him at North Shingles, and the disguised woman who had terrified him in Vauxhall Walk, were one and the same person.

The means of effecting this new object were, to all appearance, far less easy of attainment than the means of effecting the object which Mrs. Lecount had just resigned. Here, no help was to be expected from others—no ostensibly benevolent motives could be put forward as a blind—no appeal could be made to Mr. Pendril or to Miss Garth. Here, the housekeeper's only chance of success depended in the first place on her being able to effect a stolen entrance into Mr. Bygrave's house; and, in the second place, on her ability to discover whether that memorable alpaca dress from which she had secretly cut the fragment of stuff, happened to form part of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe.

Taking the difficulties now before her in their order as they occurred, Mrs. Lecount first resolved to devote the next few days to watching the habits of the inmates of North Shingles, from early in the morning to late at night; and to testing the capacity of the one servant in the house to resist the temptation of a bribe. Assuming that results proved successful, and that, either by money or by stratagem, she gained admission to North Shingles

(without the knowledge of Mr. Bygrave or his niece), she turned next to the second difficulty of the two—the difficulty of obtaining access to Miss Bygrave's wardrobe.

If the servant proved corruptible, all obstacles in this direction might be considered as removed beforehand. But, if the servant proved honest, the new problem was no easy one to solve.

Long and careful consideration of the question led the housekeeper, at last, to the bold resolution of obtaining an interview—if the servant failed her—with Mrs. Bygrave herself. What was the true cause of this lady's mysterious seclusion? Was she a person of the strictest and the most inconvenient integrity? or a person who could not be depended on to preserve a secret? or a person who was as artful as Mr. Bygrave himself, and who was kept in reserve to forward the object of some new deception which was yet to come? In the first two cases, Mrs. Lecount could trust in her own powers of dissimulation, and in the results which they might achieve. In the last case (if no other end was gained), it might be of vital importance to her to discover an enemy hidden in the dark. In any event, she determined to run the risk. Of the three chances in her favour, on which she had reckoned at the outset of the struggle—the chance of entrapping Magdalen by word of mouth, the chance of entrapping her by the help of her friends, and the chance of entrapping her by means of Mrs. Bygrave—two had been tried, and two had failed. The third remained to be tested yet; and the third might succeed.

So, the captain's enemy plotted against him in the privacy of her own chamber, while the captain watched the light in her window from the beach outside.

Before breakfast the next morning, Captain Wragge posted the forged letter to Zurich with his own hand. He went back to North Shingles with his mind not quite decided on the course to take with Mrs. Lecount, during the all-important interval of the next ten days.

Greatly to his surprise, his doubts on this point were abruptly decided by Magdalen herself.

He found her waiting for him, in the room where the breakfast was laid. She was walking restlessly to and fro, with her head drooping on her bosom, and her hair hanging disordered over her shoulders. The moment she looked up on his entrance, the captain felt the fear which Mrs. Wragge had felt before him—the fear that her mind would be struck prostrate again, as it had been struck once already, when Frank's letter reached her in Vauxhall Walk.

'Is he coming again to-day?' she asked, pushing away from her the chair which Captain Wragge offered, with such violence that she threw it on the floor.

'Yes,' said the captain, wisely answering her in the fewest words. 'He is coming at two o'clock.'

'Take me away!' she exclaimed, tossing her hair back wildly from her face. 'Take me away before he comes. I can't get over the horror of marrying him, while I am in this hateful place—take me somewhere where I can forget it, or I shall go mad! Give me two days' rest—two days out of sight of that horrible sea—two days out of prison in this horrible house—two days anywhere in the wide world, away from Aldborough. I'll come back with you! I'll go through with it to the end! Only give me two days' escape from that man and everything belonging to him! Do you hear, you villain?' she cried, seizing his arm and shaking it in a frenzy of passion—'I have been tortured enough—I can bear it no longer!'

There was but one way of quieting her, and the captain instantly took it.

'If you will try to control yourself,' he said, 'you shall leave Aldborough in an hour's time.'

She dropped his arm, and leaned back heavily against the wall behind her.

‘I’ll try,’ she answered, struggling for breath, but looking at him less wildly. ‘You sha’n’t complain of me, if I can help it.’ She attempted confusedly to take her handkerchief from her apron pocket, and failed to find it. The captain took it out for her. Her eyes softened, and she drew her breath more freely, as she received the handkerchief from him. ‘You are a kinder man than I thought you were,’ she said; ‘I am sorry I spoke so passionately to you just now—I am very, very sorry.’ The tears stole into her eyes, and she offered him her hand with the native grace and gendeness of happier days. ‘Be friends with me again,’ she said, pleadingly. ‘I’m only a girl, Captain Wragge—I’m only a girl!’

He took her hand in silence—patted it for a moment—and then opened the door for her to go back to her own room again. There was genuine regret in his face, as he showed her that trifling attention. He was a vagabond and a cheat; he had lived a mean, shuffling, degraded life—but he was human; and she had found her way to the lost sympathies in him which not even the self-profanation of a swindler’s existence could wholly destroy. ‘Damn the breakfast!’ he said, when the servant came in for her orders. ‘Go to the inn directly, and say I want a carriage and pair at the door in an hour’s time.’ He went out into the passage, still chafing under a sense of mental disturbance which was new to him; and shouted to his wife more fiercely than ever. ‘Pack up what we want for a week’s absence—and be ready in half an hour!’ Having issued those directions, he returned to the breakfast-room, and looked at the halfspread table with an impatient wonder at his disinclination to do justice to his own meal. ‘She has rubbed off the edge of my appetite,’ he said to himself, with a forced laugh. ‘I’ll try a cigar, and a turn in the fresh air.’

If he had been twenty years younger, those remedies might have failed him. But where is the man to be found, whose internal policy succumbs to revolution, .when that man is on the wrong side of fifty? Exercise and change of place gave the captain back into the possession of himself. He recovered the lost sense of the flavour of his cigar; and recalled his wandering attention to the question of his approaching absence from Aldborough. A few minutes’ consideration satisfied his mind that Magdalen’s outbreak had forced him to take the course of all others, which, on a fair review of existing emergencies, it was now most desirable to adopt.

Captain Wragge’s inquiries, on the evening when he and Magdalen had drunk tea at Sea View, had certainly informed him that the housekeeper’s brother possessed a modest competence; that his sister was his nearest living relative; and that there were some unscrupulous cousins on the spot, who were anxious to usurp the place in his will which properly belonged to Mrs. Lecount. Here were strong motives to take the housekeeper to Zurich, when the false report of her brother’s relapse reached England. But, if any idea of Noel Vanstone’s true position dawned on her, in the mean time—who could say whether she might not, at the eleventh hour, prefer asserting her large pecuniary interest in her master, to defending her small pecuniary interest at her brother’s bedside? While that question remained undecided, the plain necessity of checking the growth of Noel Vanstone’s intimacy with the family at North Shingles, did not admit of a doubt; and of all means of effecting that object, none could be less open to suspicion than the temporary removal of the household from their residence at Aldborough. Thoroughly satisfied with the soundness of this conclusion, Captain Wragge made straight for Sea View Cottage, to apologize and explain before the carriage came and the departure took place.

Noel Vanstone was easily accessible to visitors: he was walking in the garden before breakfast. His disappointment and vexation were freely expressed when he heard the news which his friend had to communicate. The captain’s fluent tongue, however, soon impressed on him the necessity of resignation to present circumstances. The bare hint that the ‘pious fraud’ might fail after all, if anything happened in the ten day’s interval to enlighten Mrs. Lecount, had an instant effect in making Noel Vanstone as patient and as submissive as could be wished.

‘I won’t tell you where we are going, for two good reasons,’ said Captain Wragge, when his preliminary

explanations were completed. ‘In the first place, I haven’t made up my mind yet; and, in the second place, if you don’t know what our destination is, Mrs. Lecount can’t worm it out of you. I have not the least doubt she is watching us, at this moment, from behind her window-curtain. When she asks what I wanted with you this morning, tell her I came to say good-bye for a few days—finding my niece not so well again, and wishing to take her on a short visit to some friends, to try a change of air. If you could produce an impression on Mrs. Lecount’s mind (without overdoing it), that you are a little disappointed in me, and that you are rather inclined to doubt my heartiness in cultivating your acquaintance, you will greatly help our present object. You may depend on our return to North Shingles in four or five days at farthest. If anything strikes me in the mean while, the post is always at our service, and I won’t fail to write to you.’

‘Won’t Miss Bygrave write to me?’ inquired Noel Vanstone piteously. ‘Did she know you were coming here? Did she send me no message?’

‘Unpardonable on my part to have forgotten it!’ cried the captain. ‘She sent you her love.’

Noel Vanstone closed his eyes in silent ecstasy.

When he opened them again, Captain Wragge had passed through the garden gate and was on his way back to North Shingles. As soon as his own door had closed on him, Mrs. Lecount descended from the post of observation which the captain had rightly suspected her of occupying; and addressed the inquiry to her master which the captain had rightly foreseen would follow his departure. The reply she received produced but one impression on her mind. She at once set it down as a falsehood, and returned to her own window, to keep watch over North Shingles more vigilantly than ever.

To her utter astonishment, after a lapse of less than half an hour, she saw an empty carriage draw up at Mr. Bygrave’s door. Luggage was brought out and packed on the vehicle. Miss Bygrave appeared, and took her seat in it. She was followed into the carriage by a lady of great size and stature, whom the housekeeper conjectured to be Mrs. Bygrave. The servant came next, and stood waiting on the path. The last person to appear was Mr. Bygrave. He locked the house-door, and took the key away with him to a cottage near at hand, which was the residence of the landlord of North Shingles. On his return, he nodded to the servant—who walked away by herself towards the humbler quarter of the little town—and joined the ladies in the carriage. The coachman mounted the box, and the vehicle disappeared.

Mrs. Lecount laid down the opera-glass, through which she had been closely investigating these proceedings, with a feeling of helpless perplexity which she was almost ashamed to acknowledge to herself. The secret of Mr. Bygrave’s object in suddenly emptying his house at Aldborough of every living creature in it, was an impenetrable mystery to her.

Submitting herself to circumstances with a ready resignation which Captain Wragge had not shown, on his side, in a similar situation, Mrs. Lecount wasted neither time nor temper in unprofitable guess-work. She left the mystery to thicken or to clear, as the future might decide; and looked exclusively at the uses to which she might put the morning’s event in her own interests. Whatever might have become of the family at North Shingles, the servant was left behind—and the servant was exactly the person whose assistance might now be of vital importance to the housekeeper’s projects. Mrs. Lecount put on her bonnet, inspected the collection of loose silver in her purse, and set forth on the spot to make the servant’s acquaintance.

She went first to the cottage, at which Mr. Bygrave had left the key of North Shingles, to discover the servant’s present address from the landlord. So far as this object was concerned, her errand proved successful. The landlord knew that the girl had been allowed to go home for a few days to her friends, and knew in what part of

Aldborough her friends lived. But here his sources of information suddenly dried up. He knew nothing of the destination to which Mr. Bygrave and his family had betaken themselves; and he was perfectly ignorant of the number of days over which their absence might be expected to extend. All he could say was, that he had not received a notice to quit from his tenant, and that he had been requested to keep the key of the house in his possession until Mr. Bygrave returned to claim it in his own person.

Baffled, but not discouraged, Mrs. Lecount turned her steps next towards the back street of Aldborough, and astonished the servant's relatives by conferring on them the honour of a morning call.

Easily imposed on, at starting, by Mrs. Lecount's pretence of calling to engage her, under the impression that she had left Mr. Bygrave's service—the servant did her best to answer the questions put to her. But she knew as litde as the landlord of her master's plans. All she could say about them was, that she had not been dismissed, and that she was to await the receipt of a note recalling her when necessary to her situation at North Shingles. Not having expected to find her better informed on this part of the subject, Mrs. Lecount smoothly shifted her ground, and led the woman into talking generally of the advantages and defects of her situation in Mr. Bygrave's family.

Profiting by the knowledge gained, in this indirect manner, of the Utde secrets of the household, Mrs. Lecount made two discoveries. She found out, in the first place, that the servant (having enough to do in attending to the coarser part of the domestic work) was in no position to disclose the secrets of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe, which were known only to the young lady herself and to her aunt. In the second place, the housekeeper ascertained that the true reason of Mrs. Bygrave's rigid seclusion, was to be found in the simple fact that she was litde better than an idiot, and that her husband was probably ashamed of allowing her to be seen in public. These apparently trivial discoveries enlightened Mrs. Lecount on a very important point which had been previously involved in doubt. She was now satisfied that the likeliest way to obtaining a private investigation of Magdalen's wardrobe, lay through deluding the imbecile lady and not through bribing the ignorant servant.

Having reached that conclusion—pregnant with coming assaults on the weakly-fortified discretion of poor Mrs. Wragge—the housekeeper cautiously abstained from exhibiting herself any longer under an inquisitive aspect. She changed the conversation to local topics; waited until she was sure of leaving an excellent impression behind her; and then took her leave.

Three days passed; and Mrs. Lecount and her master—each with their widely-different ends in view—watched with equal anxiety for the first signs of returning life in the direction of North Shingles. In that interval, no letter either from the uncle or the niece arrived for Noel Vanstone. His sincere feeling of irritation under this neglectful treatment, greatly assisted the effect of those feigned doubts on the subject of his absent friends, which the captain had recommended him to express in the housekeeper's presence. He confessed his apprehensions of having been mistaken, not in Mr. Bygrave only, but even in his niece as well, with such a genuine air of annoyance, that he actually contributed a new element of confusion to the existing perplexities of Mrs. Lecount.

On the morning of the fourth day, Noel Vanstone met the postman in the garden; and, to his great relief, discovered among the letters delivered to him, a note from Mr. By grave.

The date* of the note was 'Woodbridge,' and it contained a few lines only. Mr. Bygrave mentioned that his niece was better, and that she sent her love as before. He proposed returning to Aldborough on the next day—when he would have some new considerations, of a strictly private nature, to present to Mr. Noel Vanstone's mind. In the mean time he would beg Mr. Vanstone not to call at North Shingles, until he received a special invitation to do so—which invitation should certainly be given on the day when the family returned. The motive

of this apparently strange request should be explained to Mr. Vanstone's perfect satisfaction, when he was once more united to his friends. Until that period arrived, the strictest caution was enjoined on him in all his communications with Mrs. Lecount—and the instant destruction of Mr. Bygrave's letter, after due perusal of it was (if the classical phrase might be pardoned) a *sine quâ non*.

The fifth day came. Noel Vanstone (after submitting himself to the *sine quâ non*, and destroying the letter) waited anxiously for results; while Mrs. Lecount, on her side, watched patiently for events. Towards three o'clock in the afternoon, the carriage appeared again at the gate of North Shingles. Mr. Bygrave got out and tripped away briskly to the landlord's cottage for the key. He returned with the servant at his heels. Miss Bygrave left the carriage; her giant-relative followed her example; the house-door was opened; the trunks were taken off; the carriage disappeared, and the Bygraves were at home again!

Four o'clock struck, five o'clock, six o'clock, and nothing happened. In half an hour more, Mr. Bygrave—spruce, speckless, and respectable as ever—appeared on the Parade, sauntering composedly in the direction of Sea View.

Instead of at once entering the house, he passed it; stopped, as if struck by a sudden recollection; and retracing his steps, asked for Mr. Vanstone at the door. Mr. Vanstone came out hospitably into the passage. Pitching his voice to a tone which could be easily heard by any listening individual, through any open door in the bedroom regions, Mr. Bygrave announced the object of his visit on the door-mat, in the fewest possible words. He had been staying with a distant relative. The distant relative possessed two pictures—Gems by the Old Masters—which he was willing to dispose of, and which he had intrusted for that purpose to Mr. Bygrave's care. If Mr. Noel Vanstone, as an amateur in such matters, wished to see the Gems, they would be visible in half an hour's time, when Mr. Bygrave would have returned to North Shingles.

Having delivered himself of this incomprehensible announcement, the arch-conspirator laid his significant forefinger along the side of his short Roman nose—said, 'Fine weather, isn't it? Good afternoon!'—and sauntered out inscrutably to continue his walk on the Parade.

On the expiration of the half-hour, Noel Vanstone presented himself at North Shingles—with the ardour of a lover burning inextinguishably in his bosom, through the superincumbent mental fog of a thoroughly bewildered man. To his inexpressible happiness, he found Magdalen alone in the parlour. Never yet had she looked so beautiful in his eyes. The rest and relief of her four days' absence from Aldborough had not failed to produce their results; she had more than recovered her composure. Vibrating perpetually from one violent extreme to another, she had now passed from the passionate despair of five days since, to a feverish exaltation of spirits, which defied all remorse and confronted all consequences. Her eyes sparkled; her cheeks were bright with colour; she talked incessantly, with a forlorn mockery of the girlish gaiety of past days—she laughed with a deplorable persistency in laughing—she imitated Mrs. Lecount's smooth voice, and Mrs. Lecount's insinuating graces of manner, with an overcharged resemblance to the original, which was but the coarse reflection of the delicately-accurate mimicry of former times. Noel Vanstone, who had never yet seen her as he saw her now, was enchanted; his weak head whirled with an intoxication of enjoyment; his wizen cheeks flushed as if they had caught the infection from hers. The half-hour during which he was alone with her, passed like five minutes to him. When that time had elapsed, and when she suddenly left him—to obey a previously-arranged summons to her aunt's presence—miser as he was, he would have paid, at that moment, five golden sovereigns out of his pocket, for five golden minutes more, passed in her society.

The door had hardly closed on Magdalen, before it opened again, and the captain walked in. He entered on the explanations which his visitor naturally expected from him, with the unceremonious abruptness of a mein hard pressed for time, and determined to make the most of every moment at his disposal.

‘Since we last saw each other,’ he began, ‘I have been reckoning up the chances for and against us, as we stand at present. The result on my own mind, is this:—If you are still at Aldborough, when that letter from Zurich reaches Mrs. Lecount, all the pains we have taken will have been pains thrown away. If your housekeeper had fifty brothers all dying together, she would throw the whole fifty over, sooner than leave you alone at Sea View, while we are your neighbours at North Shingles.’

Noel Vanstone’s flushed cheeks turned pale with dismay. His own knowledge of Mrs. Lecount told him that this view of the case was the right one.

‘If *we* go away again,’ proceeded the captain, ‘nothing will be gained—for nothing would persuade your housekeeper, in that case, that we have not left you the means of following us. *You* must leave Aldborough, this time; and, what is more, you must go without leaving a single visible trace behind you for us to follow. If we accomplish this object, in the course of the next five days, Mrs. Lecount will take the journey to Zurich. If we fail, she will be a fixture at Sea View to a dead certainty. Don’t ask questions! I have got your instructions ready for you; and I want your closest attention to them. Your marriage with my niece depends on your not forgetting a word of what I am now going to tell you.—One question first. Have you followed my advice? Have you told Mrs. Lecount you are beginning to think yourself mistaken in me?’

‘I did worse than that,’ replied Noel Vanstone, penitently. ‘I committed an outrage on my own feelings. I disgraced myself by saying that I doubted Miss Bygrave!’

‘Go on disgracing yourself, my dear sir! Doubt us both with all your might—and I’ll help you. One question more. Did I speak loud enough this afternoon? Did Mrs. Lecount hear me?’

‘Yes. Lecount opened her door; Lecount heard you. What made you give me that message? I see no pictures here. Is this another pious fraud, Mr. Bygrave?’

‘Admirably guessed, Mr. Vanstone! You will see the object of my imaginary picture-dealing in the very next words which I am now about to address to you. When you get back to Sea View, this is what you are to say to Mrs. Lecount. Tell her that my relative’s works of Art are two worthless pictures—copies from the Old Masters, which I have tried to sell you, as originals, at an exorbitant price. Say you suspect me of being little better than a plausible impostor; and pity my unfortunate niece, for being associated with such a rascal as I am. There is your text to speak from. Say in many words what I have just said in few. You can do that, can’t you?’

‘Of course I can do it,’ said Noel Vanstone. ‘But I can tell you one thing—Lecount won’t believe me.’

‘Wait a little, Mr. Vanstone; I have not done with my instructions yet. You understand what I have just told you? Very good. We may get on from to-day to to-morrow. Go out to-morrow with Mrs. Lecount at your usual time. I will meet you on the Parade, and bow to you. Instead of returning my bow, look the other way. In plain English, cut me! That is easy enough to do, isn’t it?’

‘She won’t believe me, Mr. Bygrave—she won’t believe me!’

‘Wait a litde again, Mr. Vanstone. There are more instructions to come. You have got your directions for today, and you have got your directions for to-morrow. Now for the day after. The day after is the seventh day since we sent the letter to Zurich. On the seventh day, decline to go out walking as before, from dread of the annoyance of meeting me again. Grumble about the smallness of the place; complain of your health; wish you had never come to Aldborough, and never made acquaintance with the Bygraves; and when you have well worried Mrs. Lecount with your discontent, ask her on a sudden, if she can’t suggest a change for the better. If you put that question to her naturally, do you think she can be depended on to answer it?’

‘She won’t want to be questioned at all,’ replied Noel Vanstone, irritably. ‘I have only got to say I am tired of Aldborough; and, if she believes me—which she won’t; I’m quite positive, Mr. Bygrave, she won’t!—she will have her suggestion ready before I can ask for it.’

‘Ay! ay!’ said the captain eagerly. ‘There is some place, then, that Mrs. Lecount wants to go to, this autumn?’

‘She wants to go there (hang her!) every autumn.’

‘To go where?’

‘To Admiral Bartram’s—you don’t know him, do you?—at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh.’

‘Don’t lose your patience, Mr. Vanstone! What you are now telling me, is of the most vital importance to the object we have in view. Who is Admiral Bartram?’

‘An old friend of my father’s. My father laid him under obligations—my father lent him money, when they were both young men. I am like one of the family at St. Crux; my room is always kept ready for me. Not that there’s any family at the admiral’s, except his nephew, George Bartram. George is my cousin; I’m as intimate with George as my father was with the admiral—and I’ve been sharper than my father, for I haven’t lent my friend any money. Lecount always makes a show of liking George—I believe to annoy me. She likes the admiral, too: he flatters her vanity. He always invites her to come with me to St. Crux. He lets her have one of the best bed-rooms; and treats her as if she was a lady. She’s as proud as Lucifer—she likes being treated like a lady—and she pesters me every autumn to go to St. Crux. What’s the matter? What are you taking out your pocket-book for?’

‘I want the admiral’s address, Mr. Vanstone—for a purpose which I will explain immediately.’

With those words, Captain Wragge opened his pocket-book, and wrote down the address from Noel Vanstone’s dictation, as follows: ‘Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, near Ossory, Essex.’

‘Good!’ cried the captain, closing his pocket-book again. ‘The only difficulty that stood in our way, is now cleared out of it. Patience, Mr. Vanstone—patience! Let us take up my instructions again at the point where we dropped them. Give me five minutes more attention; and you will see your way to your marriage, as plainly as I see it. On the day after to-morrow, you declare you are tired of Aldborough; and Mrs. Lecount suggests St. Crux. You don’t say yes or no on the spot—you take the next day to consider it—and you make up your mind the last thing at night to go to St. Crux the first thing in the morning. Are you in the habit of superintending your own packing up? or do you usually shift all the trouble of it on Mrs. Lecount’s shoulders?’

‘Lecount has all the trouble, of course; Lecount is paid for it! But I don’t really go, do I?’

‘You go as fast as horses can take you to the railway; without having held any previous communication with this house, either personally or by letter. You leave Mrs. Lecount behind to pack up your curiosities, to settle with the tradespeople, and to follow you to St. Crux the next morning. The next morning is the tenth morning. On the tenth morning she receives the letter from Zurich; and if you only carry out my instructions, Mr. Vanstone—as sure as you sit there, to Zurich she goes!’

Noel Vanstone’s colour began to rise again, as the captain’s stratagem dawned on him at last in its true light.

‘And what am I to do at St. Crux?’ he inquired.

‘Wait there till I call for you,’ replied the captain. ‘As soon as Mrs. Lecount’s back is turned, I will go to the

church here and give the necessary notice of the marriage. The same day or the next, I will travel to the address written down in my pocket-book—pick you up at the admiral's—and take you on to London with me to get the licence. With that document in our possession, we shall be on our way back to Aldborough, while Mrs. Lecount is on her way out to Zurich—and before she starts on her return journey, you and my niece will be man and wife! There are your future prospects for you. What do you think of them?'

'What a head you have got!' cried Noel Vanstone, in a sudden outburst of enthusiasm. 'You're the most extraordinary man I ever met with. One would think you had done nothing all your life but take people in.'

Captain Wragge received that unconscious tribute to his native genius, with the complacency of a man who felt that he thoroughly deserved it.

'I have told you already, my dear sir,' he said, modesdy, 'that I never do things by halves. Pardon me for reminding you that we have no time for exchanging mutual civilities. Are you quite sure about your instructions? I dare not write them down, for fear of accidents. Try the system of artificial memory—count your instructions off, after me, on your thumb and your four fingers. To-day, you tell Mrs. Lecount I have tried to take you in with my relative's works of Art. To-morrow, you cut me on the Parade. The day after, you refuse to go out, you get tired of Aldborough, and you allow Mrs. Lecount to make her suggestion. The next day, you accept the suggestion. And the next day to that, you go to St. Crux. Once more, my dear sir! Thumb—works of Art. Forefinger—cut me on the Parade. Middle finger—tired of Aldborough. Third finger—take Lecount's advice. Little finger—off to St. Crux. Nothing can be clearer—nothing can be easier to do. Is there anything you don't understand? Anything that I can explain over again, before you go?'

'Only one thing,' said Noel Vanstone. 'Is it settled that I am not to come here again before I go to St. Crux?'

'Most decidedly!' answered the captain. 'The whole success of the enterprise depends on your keeping away. Mrs. Lecount will try the credibility of everything you say to her by one test—the test of your communicating, or not, with this house. She will watch you, night and day! Don't call here, don't send messages, don't write letters—don't even go out by yourself. Let her see you start for St. Crux, on her suggestion; with the absolute certainty in her own mind that you have followed her advice without communicating it in any form whatever to me or to my niece. Do that, and she *must* believe you, on the best of all evidence for our interests, and the worst for hers—the evidence of her own senses.'

With those last words of caution, he shook the little man warmly by the hand, and sent him home on the spot.*

Chapter X

On returning to Sea View, Noel Vanstone executed the instructions which prescribed his line of conduct for the first of the five days with unimpeachable accuracy. A faint smile of contempt hovered about Mrs. Lecount's lips, while the story of Mr. Bygrave's attempt to pass off his spurious pictures as originals was in progress, but she did not trouble herself to utter a single word of remark when it had come to an end. 'Just what I said!' thought Noel Vanstone, cunningly watching her face—'she doesn't believe a word of it!'

The next day the meeting occurred on the Parade. Mr. Bygrave took off his hat; and Noel Vanstone looked the other way. The captain's start of surprise and scowl of indignation, were executed to perfection—but they plainly failed to impose on Mrs. Lecount. 'I am afraid, sir, you have offended Mr. Bygrave to-day,' she

ironically remarked. ‘Happily for you, he is an excellent Christian! and I venture to predict that he will forgive you to-morrow.’

Noel Vanstone wisely refrained from committing himself to an answer. Once more, he privately applauded his own penetration; once more, he triumphed over his ingenious friend.

Thus far, the captain’s instructions had been too clear and simple to be mistaken by any one. But they advanced in complication with the advance of time; and on the third day, Noel Vanstone fell confusedly into the commission of a slight error. After expressing the necessary weariness of Aldborough, and the consequent anxiety for change of scene, he was met (as he had anticipated) by an immediate suggestion from the housekeeper, recommending a visit to St. Crux. In giving his answer to the advice thus tendered, he made his first mistake. Instead of deferring his decision until the next day, he accepted Mrs. Lecount’s suggestion on the day when it was offered to him.

The consequences of this error were of no great importance. The housekeeper merely set herself to watch her master, one day earlier than had been calculated on—a result which had been already provided for by the wise precautionary measure of forbidding Noel Vanstone all communication with North Shingles. Doubting, as Captain Wragge had foreseen, the sincerity of her master’s desire to break off his connection with the Bygraves by going to St. Crux, Mrs. Lecount tested the truth or falsehood of the impression produced on her own mind, by vigilantly watching for signs of secret communication on one side or on the other. The close attention with which she had hitherto observed the out-goings and in-comings at North Shingles, was now entirely transferred to her master. For the rest of that third day, she never let him out of her sight; she never allowed any third person who came to the house, on any pretence whatever, a minute’s chance of private communication with him. At intervals, through the night, she stole to the door of his room, to listen and assure herself that he was in bed; and before sunrise the next morning, the coastguardsman going his rounds was surprised to see a lady who had risen as early as himself, engaged over her work at one of the upper windows of Sea View.

On the fourth morning, Noel Vanstone came down to breakfast conscious of the mistake that he had committed on the previous day. The obvious course to take, for the purpose of gaining time, was to declare that his mind was still undecided. He made the assertion boldly, when the housekeeper asked him if he meant to move that day. Again, Mrs. Lecount offered no remark; and again the signs and tokens of incredulity showed themselves in her face. Vacillation of purpose was not at all unusual in her experience of her master. But, on this occasion, she believed that his caprice of conduct was assumed, for the purpose of gaining time to communicate with North Shingles; and she accordingly set her watch on him once more, with doubled and trebled vigilance.

No letters came that morning. Towards noon the weather changed for the worse, and all idea of walking out as usual was abandoned. Hour after hour, while her master sat in one of the parlours, Mrs. Lecount kept watch in the other—with the door into the passage open, and with a full view of North Shingles through the convenient side window at which she had established herself. Not a sign that was suspicious appeared; not a sound that was suspicious caught her ear. As the evening closed in, her master’s hesitation came to an end. He was disgusted with the weather; he hated the place; he foresaw the annoyance of more meetings with Mr. Bygrave—and he was determined to go to St. Crux the first thing the next morning. Lecount could stay behind to pack up the curiosities and settle with the tradespeople, and could follow him to the admiral’s on the next day. The housekeeper was a little staggered by the tone and manner in which he gave these orders. He had, to her own certain knowledge, effected no communication of any sort with North Shingles—and yet he seemed determined to leave Aldborough at the earliest possible opportunity. For the first time she hesitated in her adherence to her own conclusions. She remembered that her master had complained of the Bygraves, before they returned to Aldborough; and she was conscious that her own incredulity had once already misled her, when the appearance

of the travelling carriage at the door had proved even Mr. Bygrave himself to be as good as his word.

Still, Mrs. Lecount determined to act with unrelenting caution to the last. That night, when the doors were closed, she privately removed the keys from the door in front and the door at the back. She then softly opened her bedroom window, and sat down by it, with her bonnet and cloak on, to prevent her taking cold. Noel Vanstone's window was on the same side of the house as her own. If any one came in the dark to speak to him from the garden beneath, they would speak to his housekeeper as well. Prepared at all points to intercept every form of clandestine communication which stratagem could invent, Mrs. Lecount watched through the quiet night. When morning came, she stole down-stairs before the servant was up, restored the keys to their places, and reoccupied her position in the parlour, until Noel Vanstone made his appearance at the breakfast-table. Had he altered his mind? No. He declined posting to the railway on account of the expense; but he was as firm as ever in his resolution to go to St. Crux. He desired that an inside place might be secured for him in the early coach. Suspicious to the last, Mrs. Lecount sent the baker's man to take the place. He was a public servant, and Mr. Bygrave would not suspect him of performing a private errand.

The coach called at Sea View. Mrs. Lecount saw her master established in his place, and ascertained that the other three inside seats were already occupied by strangers. She inquired of the coachman if the outside places (all of which were not yet filled up) had their full complement of passengers also. The man replied in the affirmative. He had two gentlemen to call for in the town, and the others would take their places at the inn. Mrs. Lecount forthwith turned her steps towards the inn, and took up her position on the Parade opposite, from a point of view which would enable her to see the last of the coach on its departure. In ten minutes more it rattled away, full outside and in; and the housekeeper's own eyes assured her that neither Mr. Bygrave himself, nor any one belonging to North Shingles, was among the passengers.

There was only one more precaution to take, and Mrs. Lecount did not neglect it. Mr. Bygrave had doubtless seen the coach call at Sea View. He might hire a carriage and follow it to the railway, on pure speculation. Mrs. Lecount remained within view of the inn (the only place at which a carriage could be obtained) for nearly an hour longer, waiting for events. Nothing happened; no carriage made its appearance; no pursuit of Noel Vanstone was now within the range of human possibility. The long strain on Mrs. Lecount's mind relaxed at last. She left her seat on the Parade, and returned in higher spirits than usual, to perform the closing household ceremonies at Sea View.

She sat down alone in the parlour and drew a long breath of relief. Captain Wragge's calculations had not deceived him. The evidence of her own senses had at last conquered the housekeeper's incredulity, and had literally forced her into the opposite extreme of belief.

Estimating the events of the last three days from her own experience of them; knowing (as she certainly knew) that the first idea of going to St. Crux had been started by herself, and that her master had found no opportunity and shown no inclination to inform the family at North Shingles that he had accepted her proposal—Mrs. Lecount was fairly compelled to acknowledge that not a fragment of foundation remained to justify the continued suspicion of treachery in her own mind. Looking at the succession of circumstances under the new light thrown on them by results, she could see nothing unaccountable—nothing contradictory anywhere. The attempt to pass off the forged pictures as originals, was in perfect harmony with the character of such a man as Mr. Bygrave. Her master's indignation at the attempt to impose on him; his plainly-expressed suspicion that Miss Bygrave was privy to it; his disappointment in the niece; his contemptuous treatment of the uncle on the Parade, his weariness of the place which had been the scene of his rash intimacy with strangers, and his readiness to quit it that morning—all commended themselves as genuine realities to the housekeeper's mind, for one sufficient reason. Her own eyes had seen Noel Vanstone take his departure from Aldborough without

leaving, or attempting to leave, a single trace behind him for the Bygraves to follow.

Thus far the housekeeper's conclusions led her—but no farther. She was too shrewd a woman to trust the future to chance and fortune. Her master's variable temper might relent. Accident might, at any time, give Mr. Bygrave an opportunity of repairing the error that he had committed, and of artfully regaining his lost place in Noel Vanstone's estimation. Admitting that circumstances had at last declared themselves unmistakably in her favour, Mrs. Lecount was not the less convinced that nothing would permanently assure her master's security for the future, but the plain exposure of the conspiracy which she had striven to accomplish from the first—which she was resolved to accomplish still.

'I always enjoy myself at St. Crux,' thought Mrs. Lecount, opening her account-books, and sorting the tradesmen's bills. 'The admiral is a gentleman, the house is noble, the table is excellent. No matter! Here, at Sea View, I stay by myself, till I have seen the inside of Miss Bygrave's wardrobe.'

She packed her master's collection of curiosities in their various cases, settled the claims of the tradespeople, and superintended the covering of the furniture in the course of the day. Towards nightfall she went out, bent on investigation; and ventured into the garden at North Shingles, under cover of the darkness. She saw the light in the parlour window, and the lights in the windows of the rooms up-stairs, as usual. After an instant's hesitation she stole to the house-door, and noiselessly tried the handle from the outside. It turned the lock as she had expected, from her experience of houses at Aldborough and at other watering-places—but the door resisted her; the door was distrustfully bolted on the inside. After making that discovery, she went round to the back of the house, and ascertained that the door on that side was secured in the same manner. 'Bolt your doors, Mr. Bygrave, as fast as you like,' said the housekeeper, stealing back again to the Parade. 'You can't bolt the entrance to your servant's pocket. The best lock you have may be opened by a golden key.'

She went back to bed. The ceaseless watching, the unrelaxing excitement of the last two days, had worn her out.

The next morning she rose at seven o'clock. In half an hour more she saw the punctual Mr. Bygrave—as she had seen him on many previous mornings, at the same time—issue from the gate of North Shingles, with his towels under his arm, and make his way to a boat that was waiting for him on the beach. Swimming was one among the many personal accomplishments of which the captain was master. He was rowed out to sea every morning, and took his bath luxuriously in the deep blue water. Mrs. Lecount had already computed the time consumed in this recreation by her watch; and had discovered that a full hour usually elapsed, from the moment when he embarked on the beach to the moment when he returned.

During that period, she had never seen any other inhabitant of North Shingles leave the house. The servant was no doubt at her work in the kitchen; Mrs. Bygrave was probably still in her bed; and Miss Bygrave (if she was up at that early hour) had perhaps received directions not to venture out in her uncle's absence. The difficulty of meeting the obstacle of Magdalen's presence in the house, had been, for some days past, the one difficulty which all Mrs. Lecount's ingenuity had thus far proved unable to overcome.

She sat at the window for a quarter of an hour after the captain's boat had left the beach, with her mind hard at work, and her eyes fixed mechanically on North Shingles—she sat, considering what written excuse she could send to her master for delaying her departure from Aldborough for some days to come—when the door of the house she was watching suddenly opened; and Magdalen herself appeared in the garden. There was no mistaking her figure and her dress. She took a few steps hastily towards the gate, stopped, and pulled down the veil of her garden hat, as if she felt the clear morning light too much for her—then hurried out on the Parade, and walked away northward, in such haste, or in such preoccupation of mind, that she went through the garden-gate without closing it after her.

Mrs. Lecount started up from her chair, with a moment's doubt of the evidence of her own eyes. Had the opportunity which she had been vainly plotting to produce, actually offered itself to her, of its own accord? Had the chances declared themselves at last in her favour, after steadily acting against her for so long? There was no doubt of it: in the popular phrase, 'her luck had turned.' She snatched up her bonnet and mantilla; and made for North Shingles, without an instant's hesitation. Mr. Bygrave out at sea; Miss Bygrave away for a walk; Mrs. Bygrave and the servant both at home, and both easily dealt with—the opportunity was not to be lost; the risk was well worth running!

This time, the house-door was easily opened: no one had bolted it again, after Magdalen's departure. Mrs. Lecount closed the door softly; listened for a moment in the passage; and heard the servant noisily occupied in the kitchen with her pots and pans. 'If my lucky star leads me straight into Miss Bygrave's room,' thought the housekeeper, stealing noiselessly up the stairs, 'I may find my way to her wardrobe without disturbing anybody.'

She tried the door nearest to the front of the house, on the right-hand side of the landing. Capricious chance had deserted her already. The lock was turned. She tried the door opposite, on her left hand. The boots ranged symmetrically in a row, and the razors on the dressing-table, told her at once that she had not found the right room yet. She returned to the right-hand side of the landing, walked down a little passage, leading to the back of the house, and tried a third door. The door opened—and the two opposite extremes of female humanity, Mrs. Wragge and Mrs. Lecount, stood face to face in an instant!

'I beg ten thousand pardons!' said Mrs. Lecount, with the most consummate self-possession.

'Lord bless us and save us!' cried Mrs. Wragge, with the most helpless amazement.

The two exclamations were uttered in a moment; and, in that moment, Mrs. Lecount took the measure of her victim. Nothing of the least importance escaped her. She noticed the Oriental Cashmere Robe lying half made, and half unpicked again, on the table; she noticed the imbecile foot of Mrs. Wragge searching blindly in the neighbourhood of her chair for a lost shoe; she noticed that there was a second door in the room besides the door by which she had entered, and a second chair within easy reach, on which she might do well to seat herself in a friendly and confidential way. 'Pray don't resent my intrusion,' pleaded Mrs. Lecount, taking the chair. 'Pray allow me to explain myself!'

Speaking in her softest voice; surveying Mrs. Wragge with a sweet smile on her insinuating lips, and a melting interest in her handsome black eyes, the housekeeper told her little introductory series of falsehoods, with an artless truthfulness of manner which the Father of Lies himself might have envied. She had heard from Mr. Bygrave that Mrs. Bygrave was a great invalid; she had constantly reproached herself, in her idle half-hours at Sea View (where she filled the situation of Mr. Noel Vans tone's housekeeper), for not having offered her friendly services to Mrs. Bygrave; she had been directed by her master (doubtless well known to Mrs. Bygrave as one of her husband's friends, and, naturally, one of her charming niece's admirers) to join him that day at the residence to which he had removed from Aid-borough; she was obliged to leave early, but she could not reconcile it to her conscience to go, without calling to apologize for her apparent want of neighbourly consideration; she had found nobody in the house, she had not been able to make the servant hear, she had presumed (not discovering that apartment down-stairs) that Mrs. Bygrave's boudoir might be on the upper story; she had thoughtlessly committed an intrusion of which she was sincerely ashamed, and she could now only trust to Mrs. Bygrave's indulgence to excuse and forgive her.

A less elaborate apology might have served Mrs. Lecount's purpose. As soon as Mrs. Wragge's struggling perceptions had grasped the fact that her unexpected visitor was a neighbour, well known to her by repute, her

whole being became absorbed in admiration of Mrs. Lecount's lady-like manners, and Mrs. Lecount's perfectly-fitting gown! 'What a noble way she has of talking!' thought poor Mrs. Wragge, as the housekeeper reached her closing sentence. 'And, oh my heart alive, how nicely she's dressed!'

'I see I disturb you,' pursued Mrs. Lecount, artfully availing herself of the Oriental Cashmere Robe, as a means ready at hand of reaching the end she had in view—'I see I disturb you, ma'am, over an occupation which, I know by experience, requires the closest attention. Dear, dear me, you are unpicking the dress again, I see, after it has been made! This is my own experience again, Mrs. Bygrave. Some dresses are so obstinate! Some dresses seem to say to one, in so many words, "No! you may do what you like with me; I won't fit!" '

Mrs. Wragge was greatly struck by this happy remark. She burst out laughing, and clapped her great hands in hearty approval.

'That's what this gown has been saying to me, ever since I first put the scissors into it,' she exclaimed cheerfully. 'I know I've got an awful big back—but that's no reason. Why should a gown be weeks on hand, and then not meet behind you after all? It hangs over my Boasom like a sack—it does. Look here, ma'am, at the skirt. It won't come right. It draggles in front, and cocks up behind. It shows my heels—and, Lord knows, I get into scrapes enough about my heels, without showing them into the bargain!'

'May I ask a favour?' inquired Mrs. Lecount, confidentially. 'May I try, Mrs. Bygrave, if I can make my experience of any use to you? I think our bosoms, ma'am, are our great difficulty. Now, this bosom of yours?—Shall I say in plain words what I think? This bosom of yours is an Enormous Mistake!'

'Don't, say that!' cried Mrs. Wragge, imploringly. 'Don't please, there's a good soul! It's an awful big one, I know; but it's modelled, for all that from one of Magdalen's own.'

She was far too deeply interested on the subject of the dress to notice that she had forgotten herself already, and that she had referred to Magdalen by her own name. Mrs. Lecount's sharp ears detected the mistake the instant it was committed. 'So! so!' she thought. 'One discovery already. If I had ever doubted my own suspicions, here is an estimable lady who would now have set me right.—I beg your pardon,' she proceeded, aloud, 'did you say this was modelled from one of your niece's dresses?'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Wragge. 'It's as like as two peas.'

'Then,' replied Mrs. Lecount, adroitly, 'there must be some serious mistake in the making of your niece's dress. Can you show it to me?'

'Bless your heart—yes!' cried Mrs. Wragge. 'Step this way, ma'am; and bring the gown along with you, please. It keeps sliding off, out of pure aggravation, if you lay it out on the table. There's lots of room on the bed in here.'

She opened the door of communication, and led the way eagerly into Magdalen's room. As Mrs. Lecount followed, she stole a look at her watch. Never before had time flown as it flew that morning! In twenty minutes more, Mr. Bygrave would be back from his bath.

'There!' said Mrs. Wragge, throwing open the wardrobe, and taking a dress down from one of the pegs. 'Look there! There's plaits on her Boasom, and plaits on mine. Six of one, and half a dozen of the other; and mine are the biggest—that's all!'

Mrs. Lecount shook her. head gravely, and entered forthwith into subtledes of disquisition on the art of dress-making, which had the desired effect of utterly bewildering the proprietor of the Oriental Cashmere Robe, in

less than three minutes.

‘Don’t!’ cried Mrs. Wragge, imploringly. ‘Don’t go on like that! I’m miles behind you; and my head’s Buzzing already. Tell us, like a good soul, what’s to be done. You said something about the pattern just now. Perhaps I’m too big for the pattern? I can’t help it, if I am. Many’s the good cry I had, when I was a growing girl, over my own size! There’s half too much of me, ma’am—measure me along or measure me across, I don’t deny it—there’s half too much of me, any way.’

‘My dear madam,’ protested Mrs. Lecount, ‘you do yourself a wrong! Permit me to assure you that you possess a commanding figure—a figure of Minerva. A majestic simplicity in the form of a woman, imperatively demands a majestic simplicity in the form of that woman’s dress. The laws of costume are classical; the laws of costume must not be trifled with! Plaits for Venus—puffs for Juno—folds for Minerva. I venture to suggest a total change of pattern. Your niece has other dresses in her collection. Why may we not find a Minerva pattern among them?’

As she said those words, she led the way back to the wardrobe.

Mrs. Wragge followed, and took the dresses out, one by one, shaking her head despondently. Silk dresses appeared, muslin dresses appeared. The one dress which remained invisible, was the dress of which Mrs. Lecount was in search.

‘There’s the lot of ’em,’ said Mrs. Wragge. ‘They may do for Venus and the two other Ones (I’ve seen ’em in picters without a morsel of decent linen among the three)—but they won’t do for Me.’

‘Surely there is another dress left?’ said Mrs. Lecount, pointing to the wardrobe, but touching nothing in it. ‘Surely I see something hanging in the comer, behind that dark shawl?’

Mrs. Wragge removed the shawl; Mrs. Lecount opened the door of the wardrobe a little wider. There—hitched carelessly on the innermost peg—there, with its white spots, and its double flounce, was the brown Alpaca dress!

The suddenness and completeness of the discovery threw the housekeeper, practised dissembler as she was, completely off her guard. She started at the sight of the dress. The instant afterwards, her eyes turned uneasily towards Mrs. Wragge. Had the start been observed? It had passed entirely unnoticed. Mrs. Wragge’s whole attention was fixed on the Alpaca dress: she was staring at it incomprehensibly, with an expression of the utmost dismay.

‘You seem alarmed, ma’am,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘What is there in the wardrobe to frighten you?’

‘I’d have given a crown-piece out of my pocket,’ said Mrs. Wragge, ‘not to have set eyes on that gown. It had gone clean out of my head—and now it’s come back again. Cover it up!’ cried Mrs. Wragge, throwing the shawl over the dress in a sudden fit of desperation. ‘If I look at it much longer, I shall think I’m back again in Vauxhall Walk!’

Vauxhall Walk! Those two words told Mrs. Lecount she was on the brink of another discovery. She stole a second look at her watch. There was barely ten minutes to spare before the time when Mr. Bygrave might return; there was not one of those ten minutes which might not bring his niece back to the house. Caution counselled Mrs. Lecount to go, without running any more risks. Curiosity rooted her to the spot, and gave her the courage to stay at all hazards until the time was up. Her amiable smile began to harden a little, as she probed her way tenderly into Mrs. Wragge’s feeble mind.

‘You have some unpleasant remembrances of Vauxhall Walk?’ she said, with the gendest possible tone of inquiry in her voice. ‘Or, perhaps, I should say, unpleasant remembrances of that dress belonging to your niece?’

‘The last time I saw her with that gown on,’ said Mrs. Wragge, dropping into a chair and beginning to tremble, ‘was the time when I came back from shopping, and saw the Ghost.’

‘The Ghost?’ repeated Mrs. Lecount, clasping her hands in graceful astonishment. ‘Dear madam, pardon me! Is there such a thing in the world? Where did you see it? In Vauxhall Walk? Tell me—you are the first lady I ever met with who has seen a Ghost—pray tell me!’

Flattered by the position of importance which she had suddenly assumed in the housekeeper’s eyes, Mrs. Wragge entered at full length into the narrative of her supernatural adventure. The breathless eagerness with which Mrs. Lecount listened to her description of the spectre’s costume, the spectre’s hurry on the stairs, and the spectre’s disappearance in the bed-room; the extraordinary interest which Mrs. Lecount displayed on hearing that the dress in the wardrobe was the very dress in which Magdalen happened to be attired, at the awful moment when the ghost vanished—encouraged Mrs. Wragge to wade deeper and deeper into details, and to involve herself in a confusion of collateral circumstances, out of which there seemed to be no prospect of her emerging for hours to come. Faster and faster the inexorable minutes flew by; nearer and nearer came the fatal moment of Mr. Bygrave’s return. Mrs. Lecount looked at her watch for the third time, without an attempt, on this occasion, to conceal the action from her companion’s notice. There were literally two minutes left for her to get clear of North Shingles. Two minutes would be enough, if no accident happened. She had discovered the Alpaca dress; she had heard the whole story of the adventure in Vauxhall Walk; and, more than that, she had even informed herself of the number of the house—which Mrs. Wragge happened to remember, because it answered to the number of years in her own age. All that was necessary to her master’s complete enlightenment, she had now accomplished. Even if there had been time to stay longer, there was nothing worth staying for. ‘I’ll strike this worthy idiot dumb with a *coup d’état*,’ thought the housekeeper, ‘and vanish before she recovers herself.’

‘Horrible!’ cried Mrs. Lecount, interrupting the ghostly narrative by a shrill little scream, and making for the door, to Mrs. Wragge’s unutterable astonishment, without the least ceremony. ‘You freeze the very marrow off my bones. Good-morning!’ She coolly tossed the Oriental Cashmere Robe into Mrs. Wragge’s expansive lap, and left the room in an instant.

As she swiftly descended the stairs, she heard the door of the bed-room open.

‘Where are your manners?’ cried a voice from above, hailing her feebly over the banisters. ‘What do you mean by pitching my gown at me, in that way? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!’ pursued Mrs. Wragge, turning from a lamb to a lioness, as she gradually realized the indignity offered to the Cashmere Robe. ‘You nasty foreigner, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!’

Pursued by this valedictory address, Mrs. Lecount reached the house-door, and opened it without interruption. She glided rapidly along the garden path; passed through the gate; and finding herself safe on the Parade, stopped, and looked towards the sea.

The first object which her eyes encountered, was the figure of Mr. Bygrave, standing motionless on the beach—a petrified bather, with his towels in his hand! One glance at him was enough to show that he had seen the housekeeper passing out through his garden-gate.

Rightly conjecturing that Mr. Bygrave’s first impulse would lead him to make instant inquiries in his own

house, Mrs. Lecount pursued her way back to Sea View as composedly as if nothing had happened. When she entered the parlour where her solitary breakfast was waiting for her, she was surprised to see a letter lying on the table. She approached to take it up, with an expression of impatience, thinking it might be some tradesman's bill which she had forgotten.

It was the forged letter from Zurich.

Chapter XI

The postmark and the handwriting on the address (admirably imitated from the original), warned Mrs. Lecount of the contents of the letter before she opened it.

After waiting a moment to compose herself, she read the announcement of her brother's relapse.

There was nothing in the handwriting, there was no expression in any part of the letter, which could suggest to her mind the faintest suspicion of foul play. Not the shadow of a doubt occurred to her that the summons to her brother's bedside was genuine. The hand that held the letter dropped heavily into her lap; she became pale, and old, and haggard, in a moment. Thoughts, far removed from her present aims and interests; remembrances that carried her back to other lands than England, to other times than the time of her life in service, prolonged their inner shadows to the surface, and showed the traces of their mysterious passage darkly on her face. The minutes followed each other; and still the servant below stairs waited vainly for the parlour bell. The minutes followed each other; and still she sat, tearless and quiet, dead to the present and the future, living in the past.

The entrance of the servant, uncalled, roused her. With a heavy sigh, the cold and secret woman folded the letter up again, and addressed herself to the interests and the duties of the passing time.

She decided the question of going or not going, to Zurich, after a very brief consideration of it. Before she had drawn her chair to the breakfast-table, she had resolved to go.

Admirably as Captain Wragge's strategem had worked, it might have failed—unassisted by the occurrence of the morning—to achieve this result. The very accident against which it had been the captain's chief anxiety to guard—the accident which had just taken place in spite of him—was, of all the events that could have happened, the one event which falsified every previous calculation, by directly forwarding the main purpose of the conspiracy! If Mrs. Lecount had not obtained the information of which she was in search, before the receipt of the letter from Zurich, the letter might have addressed her in vain. She would have hesitated, before deciding to leave England; and that hesitation might have proved fatal to the captain's scheme.

As it was, with the plain proofs in her possession—with the gown discovered in Magdalen's wardrobe; with the piece cut out of it, in her own pocket-book; and with the knowledge, obtained from Mrs. Wragge, of the very house in which the disguise had been put on—Mrs. Lecount had now at her command, the means of warning Noel Vanstone, as she had never been able to warn him yet—-or, in other words, the means of guarding against any dangerous tendencies towards reconciliation with the Bygraves, which might otherwise have entered his mind during her absence at Zurich. The only difficulty which now perplexed her, was the difficulty of deciding whether she should communicate with her master personally, or by writing, before her departure from England.

She looked again at the doctor's letter. The word 'instantly,' in the sentence which summoned her to her dying brother, was twice underlined. Admiral Bartram's house was at some distance from the railway; the time

consumed in driving to St. Crux, and driving back again, might be time fatally lost on the journey to Zurich. Although she would infinitely have preferred a personal interview with Noel Vanstone, there was no choice on a matter of life and death, but to save the precious hours by writing to him.

After sending to secure a place at once in the early coach, she sat down to write to her master.

Her first thought was to tell him all that had happened at North Shingles that morning. On reflection, however, she rejected the idea. Once already (in copying the personal description from Miss Garth's letter) she had trusted her weapons in her master's hands, and Mr. Bygrave had contrived to turn them against her. She resolved this time to keep them strictly in her own possession. The secret of the missing fragment of the Alpaca dress was known to no living creature but herself; and, until her return to England, she determined to keep it to herself. The necessary impression might be produced on Noel Vanstone's mind without venturing into details. She knew, by experience, the form of letter which might be trusted to produce an effect on him, and she now wrote it in these words:

'Dear Mr. Noel,

'Sad news has reached me from Switzerland. My beloved brother is dying, and his medical attendant summons me instantly to Zurich. The serious necessity of availing myself of the earliest means of conveyance to the Continent, leaves me but one alternative. I must profit by the permission to leave England, if necessary, which you kindly granted to me at the beginning of my brother's illness; and I must avoid all delay, by going straight to London, instead of turning aside, as I should have liked, to see you first at St. Crux.

"Painfully as I am affected by the family calamity which has fallen on me, I cannot let this opportunity pass without adverting to another subject, which seriously concerns your welfare, and in which (on that account) your old housekeeper feels the deepest interest.

I am going to surprise and shock you, Mr. Noel. Pray don't be agitated! pray compose yourself!

'The impudent attempt to cheat you, which has happily opened your eyes to the true character of our neighbours at North Shingles, was not the only object which Mr. Bygrave had in forcing himself on your acquaintance. The infamous conspiracy with which you were threatened in London, has been in full progress against you, under Mr. Bygrave's direction, at Aldborough. Accident—I will tell you what accident when we meet—has put me in possession of information precious to your future security. I have discovered, to an absolute certainty, that the person calling herself Miss Bygrave, is no other than the woman who visited us in disguise at Vauxhall Walk.

'I suspected this, from the first; but I had no evidence to support my suspicions; I had no means of combating the false impression produced on you. My hands, I thank Heaven, are tied no longer. I possess absolute proof of the assertion that I have just made—proof that your own eyes can see; proof that would satisfy you, if you were judge in a Court of Justice.

'Perhaps, even yet, Mr. Noel, you will refuse to believe me? Be it so. Believe me or not, I have one last favour to ask, which your English sense of fair play will not deny me.

'This melancholy journey of mine will keep me away from England for a fortnight, or, at most, for three weeks. You will oblige me—and you will certainly not sacrifice your own convenience and pleasure—by staying through that interval with your friends at St. Crux. If, before my return, some unexpected circumstance throws you once more into the company of the Bygraves; and if your natural kindness of heart inclines you to receive the excuses which they will, in that case, certainly address to you—place one trifling restraint on yourself, for your own sake, if not for mine. Suspend your flirtation with the young lady (I beg pardon of all other young

ladies for calling her so!) until my return. If, when I come back, I fail to prove to you that Miss Bygrave is the woman who wore that disguise, and used those threatening words, in Vauxhall Walk, I will engage to leave your service at a day's notice; and I will atone for the sin of bearing false witness against my neighbour, by resigning every claim I have to your grateful remembrance, on your father's account as well as on your own. I make this engagement without reserves of any kind; and I promise to abide by it—if my proofs fail—on the faith of a good Catholic, and the word of an honest woman. Your faithful servant,

'Virginie Lecount.'

The closing sentences of this letter—as the housekeeper well knew when she wrote them—embodied the one appeal to Noel Vanstone, which could be certainly trusted to produce a deep and lasting effect. She might have staked her oath, her life, or her reputation on proving the assertion which she had made, and have failed to leave a permanent impression on his mind. But when she staked not only her position in his service, but her pecuniary claims on him as well, she at once absorbed the ruling passion of his life in expectation of the result. There was not a doubt of it, in the strongest of all his interests—the interest of saving his money—he would wait.

'Check-mate for Mr. Bygrave!' thought Mrs. Lecount, as she sealed and directed the letter. 'The battle is over—the game is played out.'

While Mrs. Lecount was providing for her master's future security at Sea View, events were in full progress at North Shingles.

As soon as Captain Wragge recovered his astonishment at the housekeeper's appearance on his own premises, he hurried into the house, and guided by his own forebodings of the disaster that had happened, made straight for his wife's room.

Never, in all her former experience, had poor Mrs. Wragge felt the full weight of the captain's indignation, as she felt it now. All the little intelligence she naturally possessed, vanished at once in the whirlwind of her husband's rage. The only plain facts which he could extract from her were two in number. In the first place, Magdalen's rash desertion of her post proved to have no better reason to excuse it than Magdalen's incorrigible impatience: she had passed a sleepless night; she had risen feverish and wretched; and she had gone out, reckless of all consequences, to cool her burning head in the fresh air. In the second place, Mrs. Wragge had, on her own confession, seen Mrs. Lecount, had talked with Mrs. Lecount, and had ended by telling Mrs. Lecount the story of the ghost. Having made these discoveries, Captain Wragge wasted no time in contending with his wife's terror and confusion. He withdrew at once to a window which commanded an uninterrupted prospect of Noel Vanstone's house; and there established himself, on the watch for events at Sea View, precisely as Mrs. Lecount had established herself, on the watch for events at North Shingles.

Not a word of comment on the disaster of the morning escaped him, when Magdalen returned, and found him at his post. His flow of language seemed at last to have run dry. 'I told you what Mrs. Wragge would do,' he said —'and Mrs. Wragge has done it.' He sat unflinchingly at the window, with a patience which Mrs. Lecount herself could not have surpassed. The one active proceeding in which he seemed to think it necessary to engage, was performed by deputy. He sent the servant to the inn to hire a chaise and a fast horse, and to say that he would call himself, before noon that day, and tell the ostler when the vehicle would be wanted. Not a sign of impatience escaped him, until the time drew near for the departure of the early coach. Then the captain's curly lips began to twitch with anxiety, and the captain's restless fingers beat the devil's tattoo unremittingly on the window-pane.

The coach appeared at last, and drew up at Sea View. In a minute more, Captain Wragge's own observation

informed him that one among the passengers who left Aldborough that morning, was—Mrs. Lecount.

The main uncertainty disposed of, a serious question—suggested by the events of the morning—still remained to be solved. Which was the destined end of Mrs. Lecount's journey—Zurich or St. Crux? That, she would certainly inform her master of Mrs. Wragge's ghost story, and of every other disclosure in relation to names and places, which might have escaped Mrs. Wragge's lips, was beyond all doubt. But of the two ways at her disposal of doing the mischief—either personally, or by letter—it was vitally important to the captain to know which she had chosen. If she had gone to the admiral's, no choice would be left him but to follow the coach, to catch the train by which she travelled, and to outstrip her afterwards on the drive from the station in Essex to St. Crux. If, on the contrary, she had been contented with writing to her master, it would only be necessary to devise measures for intercepting the letter. The captain decided on going to the post-office, in the first place. Assuming that the housekeeper had written, she would not have left the letter at the mercy of the servant—she would have seen it safely in the letter-box before leaving Aldborough.

'Good morning,' said the captain, cheerfully addressing the post-master. 'I am Mr. Bygrave of North Shingles. I think you have a letter in the box, addressed to Mr.———?'

The post-master was a short man, and consequently a man with a proper idea of his own importance. He solemnly checked Captain Wragge in full career.

'When a letter is once posted, sir,' he said, 'nobody out of the office has any business with it, until it reaches its address.'

The captain was not a man to be daunted, even by a post-master. A bright idea struck him. He took out his pocket-book, in which Admiral Bartram's address was written, and returned to the charge.

'Suppose a letter has been wrongly directed by mistake?' he began. 'And suppose the writer wants to correct the error after the letter is put into the box?'

'When a letter is once posted, sir,' reiterated the impenetrable local authority, 'nobody out of the office touches it on any pretence whatever.'

'Granted, with all my heart,' persisted the captain. 'I don't want to touch it—I only want to explain myself. A lady has posted a letter here, addressed to "Noel Vanstone, Esq., Admiral Bartram's, St. Crux in the Marsh, Essex." She wrote in a great hurry, and she is not quite certain whether she added the name of the post-town, "Ossory." It is of the last importance that the delivery of the letter should not be delayed. What is to hinder your facilitating the post-office work, and obliging a lady, by adding the name of the post-town (if it happens to be left out), with your own hand? I put it to you as a zealous officer—what possible objection can there be to granting my request?'

The post-master was compelled to acknowledge that there could be no objection—provided nothing but a necessary line was added to the address; provided nobody touched the letter but himself; and provided the precious time of the post-office was not suffered to run to waste. As there happened to be nothing particular to do at that moment, he would readily oblige the lady, at Mr. Bygrave's request.

Captain Wragge watched the post-master's hands, as they sorted the letters in the box, with breathless eagerness. Was the letter there? Would the hands of the zealous public servant suddenly stop? Yes! They stopped, and picked out a letter from the rest.

' "Noel Vanstone, Esquire," did you say?' asked the postmaster, keeping the letter in his own hand.

‘ “Noel Vanstone, Esquire,” ’ replied the captain, 1 “Admiral Bartram’s, St. Crux in the Marsh.” ’

‘Ossory, Essex,’ chimed in the post-master, throwing the letter back into the box. ‘The lady has made no mistake, sir.. The address is quite right.’

Nothing but a timely consideration of the heavy debt he owed to appearances, prevented Captain Wragge from throwing his tall white hat up into the air, as soon as he found the street once more. All further doubt was now at an end. Mrs. Lecount had written to her master—therefore Mrs. Lecount was on her way to Zurich!

With his head higher than ever, with the tails of his respectable frockcoat floating behind him in the breeze, with his bosom’s native impudence sitting lightly on its throne—the captain strutted to the inn and called for the railway time-table. After making certain calculations (in black and white, as a matter of course), he ordered his chaise to be ready in an hour—so as to reach the railway in time for the second train running to London—with which there happened to be no communication from Aid-borough by coach.

His next proceeding was of a far more serious kind; his next proceeding implied a terrible certainty of success. The day of the week was Thursday. From the inn he went to the church; saw the clerk; and gave the necessary notice for a marriage by licence on the following Monday.

Bold as he was, his nerves were a little shaken by this last achievement; his hand trembled as it lifted the latch of the garden gate. He doctored his nerves with brandy and water, before he sent for Magdalen to inform her of the proceedings of the morning. Another outbreak might reasonably be expected, when she heard that the last irrevocable step had been taken, and that notice had been given of the wedding day.

The captain’s watch warned him to lose no time in emptying his glass. In a few minutes, he sent the necessary message up-stairs. While waiting for Magdalen’s appearance, he provided himself with certain materials which were now necessary to carry the enterprise to its crowning point. In the first place, he wrote his assumed name (by no means in so fine a hand as usual) on a blank visiting card; and added, underneath, these words: ‘Not a moment is to be lost. I am waiting for you at the door—come down to me directly.’ His next proceeding was to take some half-dozen envelopes out of the case, and to direct them all alike to the following address: ‘Thomas Bygrave, Esq., Mussared’s Hotel, Salisbury Street, Strand, London.’ After carefully placing the envelopes and the card in his breast-pocket, he shut up the desk. As he rose from the writing-table, Magdalen came into the room.

The captain took a moment to decide on the best method of opening the interview; and determined, in his own phrase, to dash at it. In two words, he told Magdalen what had happened; and informed her that Monday was to be her wedding day.

He was prepared to quiet her if she burst into a frenzy of passion; to reason with her if she begged for time; to sympathize with her, if she melted into tears. To his inexpressible surprise, results falsified all his calculations. She heard him without uttering a word, without shedding a tear. When he had done, she dropped into a chair. Her large grey eyes stared at him vacantly. In one mysterious instant, all her beauty left her; her face stiffened awfully, like the face of a corpse. For the first time in the captain’s experience of her, fear—all-mastering fear—had taken possession of her, body and soul.

‘You are not flinching,’ he said, trying to rouse her. ‘Surely you are not flinching at the last moment?’

No light of intelligence came into her eyes; no change passed over her face. But she heard him—for she moved a litde in the chair, and slowly shook her head.

‘You planned this marriage of your own free will,’ pursued the captain, with the furtive look and the faltering voice of a man ill at ease. ‘It was your own idea—not mine. I won’t have the responsibility laid on my shoulders—no! not for twice two hundred pounds. If your resolution fails you; if you think better of it———?’

He stopped. Her face was changing; her lips were moving at last. She slowly raised her left hand, with the fingers outspread—she looked at it, as if it was a hand that was strange to her—she counted the days on it, the days before the marriage.

‘Friday, one,’ she whispered to herself; ‘Saturday, two; Sunday, three; Monday———’ Her hands dropped into her lap; her face stiffened again. The deadly fear fastened its paralyzing hold on her once more; and the next words died away on her lips.

Captain Wragge took out his handkerchief, and wiped his forehead.

‘Damn the two hundred pounds!’ he said. ‘Two thousand wouldn’t pay me for this!’

He put the handkerchief back, took the envelopes which he had addressed to himself out of his pocket, and, approaching her closely for the first time, laid his hand on her arm.

‘Rouse yourself,’ he said, ‘I have a last word to say to you. Can you listen?’

She struggled, and roused herself—a faint tinge of colour stole over her white cheeks—she bowed her head.

‘Look at these,’ pursued Captain Wragge, holding up the envelopes. ‘If I turn these to the use for which they have been written, Mrs. Lecount’s master will never receive Mrs. Lecount’s letter. If I tear them up, he will know by tomorrow’s post that you are the woman who visited him in Vauxhall Walk. Say the word! Shall I tear the envelopes up, or shall I put them back in my pocket?’

There was a pause of dead silence. The murmur of the summer waves on the shingle of the beach, and the voices of the summer idlers on the Parade, floated through the open window, and filled the empty stillness of the room.

She raised her head; she lifted her hand and pointed steadily to the envelopes.

‘Put them back,’ she said.

‘Do you mean it?’ he asked.

‘I mean it.’

As she gave that answer, there was a sound of wheels on the road outside.

‘You hear those wheels?’ said Captain Wragge.

‘I hear them.’

‘You see the chaise?’ said the captain, pointing through the window, as the chaise which had been ordered from the inn made its appearance at the garden-gate.

‘I see it.’

‘And, of your own free will, you tell me to go?’

‘Yes. Go!’

Without another word, he left her. The servant was waiting at the door with his travelling-bag. ‘Miss Bygrave is not well,’ he said. ‘Tell your mistress to go to her in the parlour.’

He stepped into the chaise, and started on the first stage of the journey to St. Crux.

Chapter XII

Towards three o’clock in the afternoon, Captain Wragge stopped at the nearest station to Ossory which the railway passed in its course through Essex. Inquiries made on the spot, informed him that he might drive to St. Crux, remain there for a quarter of an hour, and return to the station in time for an evening train to London. In ten minutes more, the captain was on the road again, driving rapidly in the direction of the coast.

After proceeding some miles on the highway, the carriage turned off, and the coachman involved himself in an intricate network of cross-roads.

‘Are we far from St. Crux?’ asked the captain, growing impatient, after mile on mile had been passed, without a sign of reaching the journey’s end.

‘You’ll see the house, sir, at the next turn in the road,’ said the man.

The next turn in the road brought them within view of the open country again. Ahead of the carriage, Captain Wragge saw a long dark line against the sky—the line of the sea wall which protects the low coast of Essex from inundation. The flat intermediate country was intersected by a labyrinth of tidal streams, winding up from the invisible sea in strange fantastic curves—rivers at high water, and channels of mud at low. On his right hand, was a quaint little village, mostly composed of wooden houses, straggling down to the brink of one of the tidal streams. On his left hand, farther away, rose the gloomy ruins of an Abbey, with a desolate pile of buildings, which covered two sides of a square attached to it. One of the streams from the sea (called in Essex, ‘backwaters’) curled almost entirely round the house. Another, from an opposite quarter, appeared to run straight through the grounds, and to separate one side of the shapeless mass of buildings, which was in moderate repair, from another, which was little better than a ruin. Bridges of wood, and bridges of brick, crossed the stream, and gave access to the house from all points of the compass. No human creature appeared in the neighbourhood, and no sound was heard but the hoarse barking of a house-dog from an invisible court-yard.

‘Which door shall I drive to, sir?’ asked the coachman. ‘The front, or the back?’

‘The back,’ stud Captain Wragge, feeling that the less notice he attracted in his present position, the safer that position might be.

The carriage twice crossed the stream before the coachman made his way through the grounds into a dreary enclosure of stone. At an open door on the inhabited side of the place, sat a weather-beaten old man, busily at work on a half-finished model of a ship. He rose and came to the carriage-door, lifting up his spectacles on his forehead, and looking disconcerted at the appearance of a stranger.

‘Is Mr. Noel Vanstone staying here?’ asked Captain Wragge.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the old man. ‘Mr. Noel came yesterday.’

‘Take that card to Mr. Vanstone, if you please,’ said the captain; ‘and say I am waiting here to see him.’

In a few minutes, Noel Vanstone made his appearance, breathless and eager; absorbed in anxiety for news from Aldborough. Captain Wragge opened the carriage-door, seized his out-stretched hand, and pulled him in without ceremony.

‘Your housekeeper has gone,’ whispered the captain, ‘and you are to be married on Monday. Don’t agitate yourself, and don’t express your feelings—there isn’t time for it. Get the first active servant you can find in the house, to pack your bag in ten minutes—take leave of the admiral—and come back at once with me to the London train.’

Noel Vanstone faintly attempted to ask a question. The captain declined to hear it.

‘As much talk as you like on the road,’ he said. ‘Time is too precious for talking here. How do we know Lecount may not think better of it? How do we know she may not turn back, before she gets to Zurich?’

That startling consideration terrified Noel Vanstone into instant submission.

‘What shall I say to the admiral?’ he asked helplessly.

‘Tell him you are going to be married, to be sure! What does it matter, now Lecount’s back is turned? If he wonders you didn’t tell him before, say it’s a runaway match, and the bride is waiting for you. Stop! Any letters addressed to you, in your absence, will be sent to this place, of course? Give the admired these envelopes, and tell him to forward your letters under cover to me. I am an old customer at the hotel we are going to; and if we find the place full, the landlord may be depended on to take care of any letters with my name on them. A safe address in London for your correspondence, may be of the greatest importance. How do we know Lecount may not write to you on her way to Zurich?’

‘What a head you have got!’ cried Noel Vanstone, eagerly taking the envelopes. ‘You think of everything.’

He left the carriage in high excitement, and ran back into the house. In ten minutes more Captain Wragge had him in safe custody, and the horses started on their return journey.

The travellers reached London in good time that evening, and found accommodation at the hotel.

Knowing the resdess, inquisitive nature of the man he had to deal with, Captain Wragge had anticipated some litde difficulty and embarrassment in meeting the questions which Noel Vanstone might put to him on the way to London. To his great relief, a startling domestic discovery absorbed his travelling companion’s whole attention at the outset of the journey. By some extraordinary oversight, Miss Bygrave had been left, on the eve of her marriage, unprovided with a maid. Noel Vanstone declared that he would take the whole responsibility of correcting this deficiency in the arrangements, on his own shoulders; he would not trouble Mr. Bygrave to give him any assistance; he would confer, when they got to their journey’s end, with the landlady of the hotel, and would examine the candidates for the vacant office himself. All the way to London, he returned again and again to the same subject; all the evening, at the hotel, he was in and out of the landlady’s sitting-room, until he fairly obliged her to lock the door. In every other proceeding which related to his marriage, he had been kept in the background; he had been compelled to follow in the footsteps of his ingenious friend. In the matter of the lady’s maid he claimed his fitting position at last—he followed nobody; he took the lead!

The forenoon of the next day was devoted to obtaining the licence—the personal distinction of making the declaration on oath being eagerly accepted by Noel Vanstone, who swore, in perfect good faith (on information previously obtained from the captain) that the lady was of age. The document procured, the bridegroom returned

to examine the characters and qualifications of the women-servants out of place,* whom the landlady had engaged to summon to the hotel—while Captain Wragge turned his steps, ‘on business personal to himself,’ towards the residence of a friend in a distant quarter of London.

The captain’s friend was connected with the law, and the captain’s business was of a twofold nature. His first object was to inform himself of the legal bearings of the approaching marriage on the future of the husband and the wife. His second object was to provide, beforehand, for destroying all traces of the destination to which he might betake himself, when he left Aldborough on the wedding-day. Having reached his end successfully, in both these cases, he returned to the hotel, and found Noel Vanstone nursing his offended dignity in the landlady’s sitting-room. Three ladies’-maids had appeared to pass their examination, and had all, on coming to the question of wages, impudently declined accepting the place. A fourth candidate was expected to present herself on the next day; and, until she made her appearance, Noel Vanstone positively declined removing from the metropolis. Captain Wragge showed his annoyance openly at the unnecessary delay thus occasioned in the return to Aldborough, but without producing any effect. Noel Vanstone shook his obstinate little head, and solemnly refused to trifle with his responsibilities.

The first event which occurred on Saturday morning, was the arrival of Mrs. Lecount’s letter to her master, enclosed in one of the envelopes which the captain had addressed to himself. He received it (by previous arrangement with the waiter) in his bedroom—read it with the closest attention—and put it away carefully in his pocket-book. The letter was ominous of serious events to come, when the housekeeper returned to England; and it was due to Magdalen—who was the person threatened—to place the warning of danger in her own possession.

Later in the day, the fourth candidate appeared for the maid’s situation—a young woman of small expectations and subdued manners, who looked (as the landlady remarked) like a person overtaken by misfortune. She passed the ordeal of examination successfully, and accepted the wages offered without a murmur. The engagement having been ratified on both sides, fresh delays ensued, of which Noel Vanstone was once more the cause. He had not yet made up his mind whether he would, or would not, give more than a guinea for the wedding-ring; and he wasted the rest of the day to such disastrous purpose in one jeweller’s shop after another, that he and the captain, and the new lady’s-maid (who travelled with them), were barely in time to catch the last train from London that evening.

It was late at night when they left the railway at the nearest station to Aldborough. Captain Wragge had been strangely silent all through the journey. His mind was ill at ease. He had left Magdalen, under very critical circumstances, with no fit person to control her; and he was wholly ignorant of the progress of events, in his absence, at North Shingles.

Chapter XIII

What had happened at Aldborough, in Captain Wragge’s absence?

Events had occurred which the captain’s utmost dexterity might have found it hard to remedy.

As soon as the chaise had left North Shingles, Mrs. Wragge received the message which her husband had charged the servant to deliver. She hastened into the parlour, bewildered by her stormy interview with the captain, and penitently conscious that she had done wrong, without knowing what the wrong was. If Magdalen’s

mind had been unoccupied by the one idea of the marriage which now filled it—if she had possessed composure enough to listen to Mrs. Wragge's rambling narrative of what had happened during her interview with the housekeeper—Mrs. Lecount's visit to the wardrobe must, sooner or later, have formed part of the disclosure; and Magdalen, although she might never have guessed the truth, must at least have been warned that there was some element of danger lurking treacherously in the Alpaca dress. As it was, no such consequence as this followed Mrs. Wragge's appearance in the parlour; for no such consequence was now possible.

Events which had happened earlier in the morning, events which had happened for days and weeks past, had vanished as completely from Magdalen's mind, as if they had never taken place. The horror of the coming Monday—the merciless certainty implied in the appointment of the day and hour—petrified all feeling in her, and annihilated all thought. Mrs. Wragge made three separate attempts to enter on the subject of the housekeeper's visit. The first time she might as well have addressed herself to the wind, or to the sea. The second attempt seemed likely to be more successful. Magdalen sighed, listened for a moment indifferendy, and then dismissed the subject. 'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'The end has come all the same. I'm not angry with you. Say no more.' Later in the day, from not knowing what else to talk about, Mrs. Wragge tried again. This time, Magdalen turned on her impadendy. 'For God's sake, don't worry me about trifles! I can't bear it.' Mrs. Wragge closed her lips on the spot, and returned to the subject no more. Magdalen, who had been kind to her at all other times, had angrily forbidden it. The captain—utterly ignorant of Mrs. Lecount's interest in the secrets of the wardrobe—had never so much as approached it. All the information that he had extracted from his wife's mental confusion, he had extracted by putting direct questions, derived purely from the resources of his own knowledge. He had insisted on plain answers, without excuses of any kind; he had carried his point as usual; and his departure the same morning had left him no chance of re-opening the question, even if his irritation against his wife had permitted him to do so. There the Alpaca dress hung, neglected in the dark; the unnoticed, unsuspected centre of dangers that were still to come.

Towards the afternoon, Mrs. Wragge took courage to start a suggestion of her own—she pleaded for a little turn in the fresh air.

Magdalen passively put on her hat; passively accompanied her companion along the public walk, until they reached its northward extremity. Here the beach was left solitary, and here they sat down, side by side, on the shingle. It was a bright exhilarating day; pleasure-boats were sailing on the calm blue water; Aldborough was idling happily afloat and ashore. Mrs. Wragge recovered her spirits in the gaiety of the prospect—she amused herself, like a child, by tossing pebbles into the sea. From time to time she stole a questioning glance at Magdalen, and saw no encouragement in her manner, no change to cordiality in her face. She sat silent on the slope of the shingle, with her elbow on her knee, and her head resting on her hand, looking out over the sea—looking with rapt attention, and yet with eyes that seemed to notice nothing. Mrs. Wragge wearied of the pebbles, and lost her interest in looking at the pleasure-boats. Her great head began to nod heavily, and she dozed in the warm drowsy air. When she woke, the pleasure-boats were far off; their sails were white specks in the distance. The idlers on the beach were thinned in number; the sun was low in the heaven; the blue sea was darker, and rippled by a breeze. Changes on sky and earth and ocean told of the waning day; change was everywhere—except close at her side. There Magdalen sat, in the same position, with weary eyes that still looked over the sea, and still saw nothing.

'Oh, do speak to me!' said Mrs. Wragge.

Magdalen started, and looked about her vacantly.

'It's late,' she said, shivering under the first sensation that reached her of the rising breeze. 'Come home; you want your tea.'

They walked home in silence.

‘Don’t be angry with me for asking,’ said Mrs. Wragge, as they sat together at the tea-table. ‘Are you troubled, my dear, in your mind?’

‘Yes,’ replied Magdalen. ‘Don’t notice me. My trouble will soon be over.’

She waited patiently until Mrs. Wragge had made an end of the meal, and then went up-stairs to her own room.

‘Monday!’ she said, as she sat down at her toilette-table. ‘Something may happen before Monday comes!’

Her fingers wandered mechanically among the brushes and combs, the tiny bottles and cases placed on the table. She set them in order, now in one way, and now in another—then on a sudden pushed them away from her in a heap. For a minute or two her hands remained idle. That interval passed, they grew restless again, and pulled the two litde drawers backwards and forwards in their grooves. Among the objects laid in one of them was a Prayer-Book, which had belonged to her at Combe-Raven, and which she had saved with her other relics of the past, when she and her sister had taken their farewell of home. She opened the Prayer-Book after a long hesitation, at the Marriage Service—shut it again, before she had read a line—and put it back hurriedly in one of the drawers. After turning the key in the lock,* she rose and walked to the window.

‘The horrible sea!’ she said, turning from it with a shudder of disgust. ‘The lonely, dreary, horrible sea!’

She went back to the drawer, and took the Prayer-Book out for the second time; half opened it again at the Marriage Service; and impatiently threw it back into the drawer. This time, after turning the lock, she took the key away—walked with it in her hand to the open window—and threw it violently from her into the garden. It fell on a bed thickly planted with flowers. It was invisible; it was lost. The sense of its loss seemed to relieve her.

‘Something may happen on Friday; something may happen on Saturday; something may happen on Sunday. Three days still!’

She closed the green shutters outside the window, and drew the curtains, to darken the room still more. Her head felt heavy; her eyes were burning hot. She threw herself on her bed, with a sullen impulse to sleep away the time.

The quiet of the house helped her, the darkness of the room helped her; the stupor of mind into which she had fallen had its effect on her senses: she dropped into a broken sleep. Her restless hands moved incessantly; her head tossed from side to side of the pillow—but still she slept. Erelong, words fell by ones and twos from her lips; words whispered in her sleep, growing more and more continuous, more and more articulate, the longer the sleep lasted; words which seemed to calm her restlessness, and to hush her into deeper repose. She smiled; she was in the happy land of dreams—Frank’s name escaped her. ‘Do you love me, Frank?’ she whispered. ‘Oh, my darling, say it again! say it again!’

The time passed, the room grew darker; and still she slumbered and dreamed. Towards sunset—without any noise inside the house or out to account for it—she started up on the bed, awake again in an instant. The drowsy obscurity of the room struck her with terror. She ran to the window, pushed open the shutters, and leaned far out into the evening air and the evening light. Her eyes devoured the trivial sights on the beach; her ears drank in the welcome murmur of the sea. Anything to deliver her from the waking impression which her dreams had left! No more darkness; no more repose. Sleep that came mercifully to others, came treacherously to her. Sleep had only closed her eyes on the future, to open them on the past.

She went down again into the parlour, eager to talk—no matter how idly, no matter on what trifles. The room was empty. Perhaps Mrs. Wragge had gone to her work—perhaps, she was too tired to talk. Magdalen took her hat from the table, and went out. The sea that she had shrunk from, a few hours since, looked friendly now. How lovely it was in its cool evening blue! What a godlike joy in the happy multitude of waves, leaping up to the light of Heaven!

She stayed out, until the night fell and the stars appeared. The night steadied her.

By slow degrees, her mind recovered its balance, and she looked her position unflinchingly in the face. The vain hope that accident might defeat the very end for which, of her own free will, she had ceaselessly plotted and toiled, vanished and left her; self-dissipated in its own weakness. She knew the true alternative, and faced it. On one side, was the revolting ordeal of the marriage—on the other, the abandonment of her purpose. Was it too late to choose between the sacrifice of the purpose, and the sacrifice of herself? Yes! too late. The backward path had closed behind her. Time that no wish could change, Time that no prayers could recall, had made her purpose a part of herself: once she had governed it; now it governed her. The more she shrank, the harder she struggled, the more mercilessly it drove her on. No other feeling in her was strong enough to master it—not even the horror that was maddening her; the horror of her marriage.

Towards nine o'clock, she went back to the house.

'Walking again!' said Mrs. Wragge, meeting her at the door. 'Come in and sit down, my dear. How tired you must be!'

Magdalen smiled, and patted Mrs. Wragge kindly on the shoulder.

'You forget how strong I am,' she said. 'Nothing hurts me.'

She lit her candle, and went up-stairs again into her room. As she returned to the old place by her toilette table, the vain hope in the three days of delay, the vain hope of deliverance by accident, came back to her—this time, in a form more tangible than the form which it had hitherto worn.

'Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Something may happen to him; something may happen to me. Something serious; something fatal. One of us may die.'

A sudden change came over her face. She shivered, though there was no cold in the air. She started, though there was no noise to alarm her.

'One of us may die. I may be the one.'

She fell into deep thought—roused herself, after a while—and, opening the door, called to Mrs. Wragge to come and speak to her.

'You were right in thinking I should fatigue myself,' she said. 'My walk has been a little too much for me. I feel tired; and I am going to bed. Good-night.' She kissed Mrs. Wragge, and softly closed the door again.

After a few turns backwards and forwards in the room, she abruptly opened her writing-case and began a letter to her sister. The letter grew and grew under her hands; she filled sheet after sheet of note-paper. Her heart was full of her subject: it was her own story addressed to Norah. She shed no tears; she was composed to a quiet sadness. Her pen ran smoothly on. After writing for more than two hours, she left off while the letter was still unfinished. There was no signature attached to it—there was a blank space reserved, to be filled up at some other time. After putting away the case, with the sheets of writing secured inside it, she walked to the window

for air, and stood there looking out.

The moon was waning over the sea. The breeze of the earlier hours had died out. On earth and ocean, the spirit of the Night brooded in a deep and awful calm.

Her head drooped low on her bosom, and all the view waned before her eyes with the waning moon. She saw no sea, no sky. Death the Tempter, was busy at her heart. Death the Tempter, pointed homeward, to the grave of her dead parents in Combe-Raven churchyard.

‘Nineteen last birthday,’ she thought. ‘Only nineteen!’ She moved away from the window—hesitated—and then looked out again at the view. ‘The beautiful night!’ she said gratefully. ‘Oh, the beautiful night!’

She left the window, and lay down on her bed. Sleep that had come treacherously before, came mercifully now; came deep and dreamless, the image of her last waking thought—the image of Death.

Early the next morning, Mrs. Wragge went into Magdalen’s room, and found that she had risen betimes. She was sitting before the glass, drawing the comb slowly through and through her hair—thoughtful and quiet.

‘How do you feel this morning, my dear?’ asked Mrs. Wragge. ‘Quite well again?’

‘Yes.’

After replying in the affirmative, she stopped, considered for a moment, and suddenly contradicted herself. ‘No,’ she said, ‘not quite well. I am suffering a little from toothache.’ As she altered her first answer in those words, she gave a twist to her hair with the comb, so that it fell forward and hid her face.

At breakfast she was very silent; and she took nothing but a cup of tea.

‘Let me go to the chemist’s and get something,’ said Mrs. Wragge.

‘No, thank you.’

‘Do let me!’

‘No!’

She refused for the second time sharply and angrily. As usual, Mrs. Wragge submitted, and let her have her own way. When breakfast was over she rose, without a word of explanation, and went out. Mrs. Wragge watched her from the window, and saw that she took the direction of the chemist’s shop.

On reaching the chemist’s door, she stopped—paused, before entering the shop, and looked in at the window—hesitated, and walked away a litde—hesitated again—and took the first turning which led back to the beach.

Without looking about her, without caring what place she chose, she seated herself on the shingle. The only persons who were near to her, in the position she now occupied, were a nursemaid and two litde boys. The youngest of the two had a tiny toy-ship in his hand. After looking at Magdalen for a little while, with the quaintest gravity and attention, the boy suddenly approached her; and opened the way to an acquaintance by putting his toy composedly on her lap.

‘Look at my ship,’ said the child, crossing his hands on Magdalen’s knee.

She was not usually patient with children. In happier days, she would not have met the boy’s advance towards her, as she met it now. The hard despair in her eyes left them suddenly; her fast-closed lips parted, and trembled.

She put the ship back into the child's hands, and lifted him on her lap.

'Will you give me a kiss?' she said, faintly.

The boy looked at his ship, as if he would rather have kissed the ship.

She repeated the question—repeated it, almost humbly. The child put his hand up to her neck, and kissed her.

'If I was your sister, would you love me?'

All the misery of her friendless position, all the wasted tenderness of her heart, poured from her in those words.

'Would you love me?' she repeated, hiding her face on the bosom of the child's frock.

'Yes,' said the boy. 'Look at my ship.'

She looked at the ship through her gathering tears.

'What do you call it?' she asked, trying hard to find her way even to the interest of a child.

'I call it Uncle Kirke's ship,' said thé boy. 'Uncle Kirke has gone away.'

The name recalled nothing to her memory. No remembrances but old remembrances lived in her now. 'Gone?' she repeated absently, thinking what she should say to her little friend next.

'Yes,' said the boy. 'Gone to China.'

Even from the lips of a child, that word struck her to the heart. She put Kirke's litde nephew off her lap, and instantly left the beach.

As she turned back to the house, the struggle of the past night renewed itself in her mind. But the sense of relief which the child had brought to her, the reviving tenderness which she had felt while he sat on her knee, influenced her still. She was conscious of a dawning hope, opening freshly on her thoughts, as the boy's innocent eyes had opened on her face when he came to her on the beach. Was it too late to turn back? Once more, she asked herself that question—and now, for the first time, she asked it in doubt.

She ran up to her own room with a lurking distrust in her changed self, which warned her to act, and not to think. Without waiting to remove her shawl or to take off her hat, she opened her writing-case, and addressed these lines to Captain Wragge, as fast as her pen could trace them.

'You will find the money I promised you, enclosed in this. My resolution has failed me. The horror of marrying him is more than I can face. I have left Aldborough. Pity my weakness, and forget me. Let us never meet again.'

With throbbing heart, with eager, trembling fingers, she drew her little white silk bag from her bosom, and took out the bank-notes to enclose them in the letter. Her hand searched impetuously; her hand had lost its discrimination of touch. She grasped the whole contents of the bag in one handful of papers; and drew them out violently, tearing some and disarranging the folds of others. As she threw them down before her on the table, the first object that met her eye was her own handwriting, faded already with time. She looked closer, and saw the words she had copied from her dead father's letter—saw the lawyer's brief and terrible commentary on them, confronting her at the bottom of the page:

Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children, and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle's mercy.

Her throbbing heart stopped; her trembling hands grew icily quiet. All the Past rose before her in mute overwhelming reproach. She took up the lines which her own hand had written hardly a minute since, and looked at the ink still wet on the letters, with a vacant incredulity.

The colour that had risen on her cheeks faded from them once more. The hard despair looked out again, cold and glittering, in her tearless eyes. She folded the bank-notes carefully, and put them back in her bag. She pressed the copy of her father's letter to her lips, and returned it to its place, with the bank-notes. When the bag was in her bosom again, she waited a litde, with her face hidden in her hands—then deliberately tore up the lines addressed to Captain Wragge. Before the ink was dry, the letter lay in fragments on the floor.

'No!' she said, as the last morsel of the torn paper dropped from her hand. 'On the way I go, there is no turning back.'

She rose composedly, and left the room. While descending the stairs she met Mrs. Wragge coming up. 'Going out again, my dear?' asked Mrs. Wragge. 'May I go with you?'

Magdalen's attention wandered. Instead of answering the question, she absently answered her own thoughts.

'Thousands of women marry for money,' she said. 'Why shouldn't I?'

The helpless perplexity of Mrs. Wragge's face, as she spoke those words, roused her to a sense of present things.

'My poor dear!' she said; 'I puzzle you, don't I? Never mind what I say,—all girls talk nonsense; and I'm no better than the rest of them. Come! I'll give you a treat. You shall enjoy yourself while the captain is away. We will have a long drive by ourselves. Put on your smart bonnet, and come with me to the hotel. I'll tell the landlady to put a nice cold dinner into a basket. You shall have all the things you like—and I'll wait on you. When you are an old, old woman, you will remember me kindly, won't you? You will say, "She wasn't a bad girl; hundreds worse than she was live and prosper, and nobody blames them." There! there! go and put your bonnet on. Oh, my God, what is my heart made of! How it lives and lives, when other girls' hearts would have died in them long ago!'

In half an hour more, she and Mrs. Wragge were seated together in the carriage. One of the horses was restive at starting. 'Flog him,' she cried angrily to the driver. 'What are you frightened about? Flog him! Suppose the carriage was upset,' she said, turning suddenly to her companion; 'and suppose I was thrown out, and killed on the spot? Nonsense! don't look at me in that way. I'm like your husband; I have a dash of humour, and I'm only joking.'

They were out the whole day. When they reached home again, it was after dark. The long succession of hours passed in the fresh air, left them both with the same sense of fatigue. Again that night, Magdalen slept the deep dreamless sleep of the night before. And so the Friday closed.

Her last thought at night, had been the thought which had sustained her throughout the day. She had laid her head on the pillow, with the same reckless resolution to submit to the coming trial, which had already expressed itself in words, when she and Mrs. Wragge met by accident on the stairs. When she woke on the morning of Saturday, the resolution was gone. The Friday's thoughts—the Friday's events even—were blotted out of her mind. Once again, creeping chill through the flow of her young blood, she felt the slow and deadly prompting of despair, which had come to her in the waning moonlight, which had whispered to her in the awful calm.

'I saw the end, as the end must be,' she said to herself, 'on Thursday night. I have been wrong ever since.'

When she and her companion met that morning, she reiterated her complaint of suffering from the toothache; she repeated her refusal to allow Mrs. Wragge to procure a remedy; she left the house after breakfast, in the direction of the chemist's shop, exactly as she had left it on the morning before.

This time she entered the shop without an instant's hesitation.

'I have got an attack of toothache,' she said abruptly to an elderly man who stood behind the counter.

'May I look at the tooth, Miss?'

'There is no necessity to look. It is a hollow tooth. I think I have caught cold in it.'

The chemist recommended various remedies, which were in vogue fifteen years since. She declined purchasing any of them.

'I have always found Laudanum relieve the pain better than anything else,' she said, trifling with the bottles on the counter, and looking at them while she spoke, instead of looking at the chemist. 'Let me have some Laudanum.'

'Certainly, Miss. Excuse my asking the question—it is only a matter of form. You are staying at Aldborough, I think?'

'Yes. I am Miss Bygrave, of North Shingles.'

The chemist bowed; and, turning to his shelves, filled an ordinary half-ounce bottle with laudanum, immediately. In ascertaining his customer's name and address beforehand, the owner of the shop had taken a precaution which was natural to a careful man—but which was by no means universal, under similar circumstances, in the state of the law at that time.

'Shall I put you up a little cotton wool with the laudanum?' he asked, after he had placed a label on the bottle, and had written a word on it in large letters.

'If you please. What have you just written on the bottle?' She put the question shaiply, with something of distrust as well as curiosity in her manner.

The chemist answered the question by turning the label towards her. She saw written on it, in large letters—Poison.

'I like to be on the safe side, Miss,' said the old man, smiling. 'Very worthy people in other respects, are often sadly careless, where poisons are concerned.'

She began trifling again with the bottles on the counter; and put another question, with an ill-concealed anxiety to hear the answer.

'Is there danger,' she asked, 'in such a litde drop of Laudanum as that?'

'There is Death in it, Miss,' replied the chemist quietly.

'Death to a child, or to a person in delicate health?'

'Death to the strongest man in England, let him be who he may.'

With that answer, the chemist sealed up the botde in its wrapping of white paper, and handed the laudanum to

Magdalen across the counter. She laughed as she took it from him, and paid for it.

‘There will be no fear of accidents at North Shingles,’ she said. ‘I shall keep the bottle locked up in my dressing-case. If it doesn’t relieve the pain, I must come to you again, and try some other remedy. Good morning.’

‘Good morning, Miss.’

She went straight back to the house, without once looking up, without noticing any one who passed her. She bnished by Mrs. Wragge in the passage, as she might have brushed by a piece of furniture. She ascended the stairs, and caught her foot twice in her dress, from sheer inattention to the common precaution of holding it up. The trivial daily interests of life had lost their hold on her already.

In the privacy of her own room, she took the bottle from its wrapping, and threw the paper and the cotton wool into the fireplace. At the moment when she did this there was a knock at the door. She hid the little bottle, and looked up impatiently. Mrs. Wragge came into the room.

‘Have you got something for your toothache, my dear?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I do anything to help you?’

‘No.’

Mrs. Wragge still lingered uneasily near the door. Her manner showed plainly that she had something more to say.

‘What is it?’ asked Magdalen, sharply.

‘Don’t be angry,’ said Mrs. Wragge. ‘I’m not settled in my mind about the captain. He’s a great writer—and he hasn’t written. He’s as quick as lightning—and he hasn’t come back. Here’s Saturday, and no signs of him. Has he run away, do you think? Has anything happened to him?’

‘I should think not. Go down stairs; I’ll come and speak to you about it directly.’

As soon as she was alone again, Magdalen rose from her chair, advanced towards a cupboard in the room which locked, and paused for a moment, with her hand on the key, in doubt. Mrs. Wragge’s appearance had disturbed the whole current of her thoughts. Mrs. Wragge’s last question, trifling as it was, had checked her on the verge of the precipice—had roused the old vain hope in her once more of release by accident.

‘Why not?’ she said. ‘Why may something not have happened to one of them?’

She placed the laudanum in the cupboard, locked it, and put the key in her pocket. ‘Time enough still,’ she thought, ‘before Monday. I’ll wait till the captain comes back.’

After some consultation down-stairs, it was agreed that the servant should sit up that night, in expectation of her master’s return. The day passed quietly, without events of any kind. Magdalen dreamed away the hours over a book. A weary patience of expectation was all she felt now—the poignant torment of thought was dulled and blunted at last. She passed the day and the evening in the parlour, vaguely conscious of a strange feeling of aversion to going back to her own room. As the night advanced, as the noises ceased indoors and out, her restlessness began to return. She endeavoured to quiet herself by reading. Books failed to fix her attention. The

newspaper was lying in a corner of the room: she tried the newspaper next.

She looked mechanically at the headings of the articles; she listlessly turned over page after page, until her wandering attention was arrested by the narrative of an Execution in a distant part of England. There was nothing to strike her in the story of the crime; and yet she read it. It was a common, horribly common, act of bloodshed—the murder of a woman in farm-service, by a man in the same employment who was jealous of her. He had been convicted on no extraordinary evidence; he had been hanged under no unusual circumstances. He had made his confession, when he knew there was no hope for him, like other criminals of his class; and the newspaper had printed it at the end of the article, in these terms:—

'I kept company with the deceased for a year or thereabouts. I stud I would marry her when I had money enough. She said I had money enough now. We had a quarrel. She refused to walk out with me any more; she wouldn't draw me my beer; she took up with my fellow-servant, David Crouch. I went to her on the Saturday, and said I would marry her as soon as we could be asked in church, if she would give up Crouch. She laughed at me. She turned me out of the washhouse, and the rest of them saw her turn me out. I was not easy in my mind. I went and sat on the gate—the gate in the meadow they call Pettit's Piece. I thought I would shoot her. I went and fetched my gun and loaded it. I went out into Pettit's Piece again. I was hard put to it, to make up my mind. I thought I would try my luck—I mean try whether to kill her or not—by throwing up the Spud* of the plough into the air. I said to myself, if it falls flat, I'll spare her; if it falls point in the earth, I'll kill her. I took a good swing with it, and shied it up. It fell point in the earth. I went and shot her. It was a bad job, but I did it. I did it, as they said I did it at the trial. I hope the Lord will have mercy on me. I wish my mother to have my old clothes. I have no more to say.'

In the happier days of her life, Magdalen would have passed over the narrative of the execution, and the printed confession which accompanied it, unread—the subject would have failed to attract her. She read the horrible story now—read it, with an interest unintelligible to herself. Her attention, which had wandered over higher and better things, followed every sentence of the murderer's hideously direct confession, from beginning to end. If the man, or the woman, had been known to her—if the place had been familiar to her memory—she could hardly have followed the narrative more closely, or have felt a more distinct impression of it left on her mind. She laid down the paper, wondering at herself; she took it up once more, and tried to read some other portion of the contents. The effort was useless; her attention wandered again. She threw the paper away; and went out into the garden. The night was dark; the stars were few and faint. She could just see the gravel walk—she could just pace backwards and forwards between the house-door and the gate.

The confession in the newspaper had taken a fearful hold on her mind. As she paced the walk, the black night opened over the sea, and showed her the murderer in the field, hurling the Spud of the plough into the air. She ran, shuddering, back to the house. The murderer followed her into the parlour. She seized the candle, and went up into her room. The vision of her own distempered fancy followed her to the place where the laudanum was hidden—and vanished there.

It was midnight; and there was no sign yet of the captain's return.

She took from the writing-case the long letter which she had written to Norah, and slowly read it through. The letter quieted her. When she reached the blank space left at the end, she hurriedly turned back, and began it over again.

One o'clock struck from the church clock; and still the captain never appeared.

She read the letter for the second time; she turned back obstinately, despairingly; and began it for the third time.

As she once more reached the last page, she looked at her watch. It was a quarter to two. She had just put the watch back in the belt of her dress, when there came to her—far off in the stillness of the morning—a sound of wheels.

She dropped the letter, and clasped her cold hands in her lap, and listened. The sound came on, faster and faster, nearer and nearer—the trivial sound to all other ears; the sound of Doom to hers. It passed the side of the house; it travelled a little further on; it stopped. She heard a loud knocking—then the opening of a window—then voices—then a long silence—then the wheels again, coming back—then the opening of the door below, and the sound of the captain's voice in the passage.

She could endure it no longer. She opened her door a little way, and called to him.

He ran up-stairs instantly, astonished that she was not in bed. She spoke to him through the narrow opening of the door; keeping herself hidden behind it, for she was afraid to let him see her face.

'Has anything gone wrong?' she asked.

'Make your mind easy,' he answered. 'Nothing has gone wrong.'

'Is no accident likely to happen between this and Monday?'

'None whatever. The marriage is a certainty.'

'A certainty?'

'Yes.'

'Good night.'

She put her hand out through the door. He took it with some litde surprise; it was not often in his experience that she gave him her hand of her own accord.

'You have sat up too long,' he said, as he felt the clasp of her cold fingers. 'I am afraid you will have a bad night—I'm afraid you will not sleep.'

She softly closed the door.

'I shall sleep,' she said, 'sounder than you think for.'

It was past two o'clock when she shut herself up alone in her room. Her chair stood in its customary place by the toilette table. She sat down for a few minutes thoughtfully—then opened her letter to Norah, and turned to the end, where the blank space was left. The last fines written above the space ran thus:… 'I have laid my whole heart bare to you; I have hidden nothing. It has come to this. The end I have toiled for, at such terrible cost to myself, is an end which I must reach or die. It is wickedness, madness, what you will—but it is so. There are now two journeys before me to choose between. If I can marry him—the journey to the church. If the profanation of myself is more than I can bear—the journey to the grave!'

Under that last sentence, she wrote these fines:—

'My choice is made. If the cruel law will let you, lay me with my father and mother, in the churchyard at home. Farewell, my love! Be always innocent; be always happy. If Frank ever asks about me, say I died forgiving him. Don't grieve long for me, Norah—I am not worth it.'

She sealed the letter, and addressed it to her sister. The tears gathered in her eyes as she laid it on the table. She waited until her sight was clear again, and then took the bank-notes once more from the little bag in her bosom. After wrapping them in a sheet of note-paper, she wrote Captain Wragge's name on the enclosure, and added these words below it: 'Lock the door of my room, and leave me till my sister comes. The money I promised you is in this. You are not to blame; it is my fault, and mine only. If you have any friendly remembrance of me, be kind to your wife for my sake.'

After placing the enclosure by the letter to Norah, she rose and looked round the room. Some few litde things in it were not in their places. She set them in order, and drew the curtains on either side, at the head of her bed. Her own dress was the next object of her scrutiny. It was all as neat, as pure, as prettily arranged as ever. Nothing about her was disordered, but her hair. Some tresses had fallen loose on one side of her head; she carefully put them back in their places, with the help of her glass. 'How pale I look!' she thought, with a faint smile. 'Shall I be paler still, when they find me in the morning?'

She went straight to the place where the laudanum was hidden, and took it out. The bottle was so small, that it lay easily in the palm of her hand. She let it remain there for a little while, and stood looking at it.

'Death!' she said. 'In this drop of brown drink—Death!'

As the words passed her lips, an agony of unutterable horror seized on her in an instant. She crossed the room unsteadily with a maddening confusion in her head, with a suffocating anguish at her heart. She caught at the table to support herself. The faint clink of the bottle, as it fell harmlessly from her loosened grasp, and rolled against some porcelain object on the table, struck through her brain like the stroke of a knife. The sound of her own voice, sunk to a whisper—her voice only uttering that one word, Death—rushed in her ears like the rushing of a wind. She dragged herself to the bedside, and rested her head against it, sitting on the floor. 'O, my life! my life!' she thought; 'what is my life worth, that I cling to it like this?'

An interval passed, and she felt her strength returning. She raised herself on her knees, and hid her face on the bed. She tried to pray—to pray to be forgiven for seeking the refuge of death. Frantic words burst from her lips —words which would have risen to cries, if she had not stifled them in the bed-clothes. She started to her feet; despair strengthened her with a headlong fury against herself. In one moment, she was back at the table; in another, the poison was once more in her hand.

She removed the cork, and lifted the bottle to her mouth.

At the first cold touch of the glass on her lips, her strong young life leapt up in her leaping blood, and fought with the whole frenzy of its loathing against the close terror of Death. Every active power in the exuberant vital force that was in her, rose in revolt against the destruction which her own will would fain have wreaked on her own life. She paused: for the second time, she paused in spite of herself. There, in the glorious perfection of her youth and health—there, trembling on the verge of human existence, she stood; with the kiss of the Destroyer close at her lips, and Nature, faithful to its sacred trust, fighting for the salvation of her to the last.

No word passed her lips. Her cheeks flushed deep; her breath came thick and fast. With the poison still in her hand, with the sense that she might faint in another moment, she made for the window, and threw back the curtain that covered it.

The new day had risen. The broad grey dawn flowed in on her, over the quiet eastern sea.

She saw the waters, heaving large and silent in the misty calm; she felt the fresh breath of the morning flutter cool on her face. Her strength returned; her mind cleared a little. At the sight of the sea, her memory recalled the

walk in the garden, overnight, and the picture which her distempered fancy had painted on the black void. In thought, she saw the picture again—the murderer hurling the Spud of the plough into the air, and setting the life or death of the woman who had deserted him, on the hazard of the falling point. The infection of that terrible superstition seized on her mind, as suddenly as the new day had burst on her view. The promise of release which she saw in it from the horror of her own hesitation, roused the last energies of her despair. She resolved to end the struggle, by setting her life or death on the hazard of a chance.

On what chance?

The sea showed it to her. Dimly distinguishable through the mist, she saw a little fleet of coasting vessels slowly drifting towards the house, all following the same direction with the favouring set of the tide. In half an hour—perhaps in less—the fleet would have passed her window. The hands of her watch pointed to four o'clock. She seated herself close at the side of the window, with her back towards the quarter from which the vessels were drifting down on her—with the poison placed on the window-sill, and the watch on her lap. For one half-hour to come, she determined to wait there, and count the vessels as they went by. If, in that time, an even number passed her—the sign given, should be a sign to live. If the uneven number prevailed—the end should be Death.

With that final resolution, she rested her head against the window, and waited for the ships to pass.

The first came; high, dark, and near in the mist; gliding silently over the silent sea. An interval—and the second followed, with the third close after it. Another interval, longer and longer drawn out—and nothing passed. She looked at her watch. Twelve minutes; and three ships. Three.

The fourth came; slower than the rest, larger than the rest, father off in the mist than the rest. The interval followed; a long interval once more. Then the next vessel passed, darkest and nearest of all. Five. The next uneven number—Five.

She looked at her watch again. Nineteen minutes; and five ships. Twenty minutes. Twenty-one, two, three—and no sixth vessel. Twenty-four; and the sixth came by. Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight; and the next uneven number—the fatal Seven—glided into view. Two minutes to the end of the half-hour. And seven ships.

Twenty-nine; and nothing followed in the wake of the seventh ship. The minute-hand of the watch moved on half way to thirty—and still the white heaving sea was a misty blank. Without moving her head from the window, she took the poison in one hand, and raised the watch in the other. As the quick seconds counted each other out, her eyes, as quick as they, looked from the watch to the sea, from the sea to the watch—looked for the last time at the sea—and saw the Eighth ship.

She never moved; she never spoke. The death of thought, the death of feeling, seemed to have come to her already. She put back the poison mechanically on the ledge of the window; and watched, as in a dream, the ship gliding smoothly on its silent way—gliding till it melted dimly into shadow—gliding till it was lost in the mist.

The strain on her mind relaxed, when the Messenger of Life had passed from her sight.

'Providence?' she whispered faintly to herself. 'Or chance?'

Her eyes closed, and her head fell back. When the sense of life returned to her, the morning sun was warm on her face—the blue heaven looked down on her—and the sea was a sea of gold.

She fell on her knees at the window, and burst into tears.

Towards noon that day, the captain, waiting below stairs, and hearing no movement in Magdalen's room, felt uneasy at the long silence. He desired the new maid to follow him up-stairs; and, pointing to the door, told her to go in softly, and see whether her mistress was awake.

The maid entered the room; remained there a moment; and came out again, closing the door gently.

'She looks beautiful, sir,' said the girl; 'and she's sleeping as quietly as a new-born child.'

Chapter XIV

The morning of her husband's return to North Shingles was a morning memorable for ever in the domestic calendar of Mrs. Wragge. She dated from that occasion the first announcement which reached her of Magdalen's marriage.

It had been Mrs. Wragge's earthly lot to pass her life in a state of perpetual surprise. Never yet, however, had she wandered in such a maze of astonishment as the maze in which she lost herself when the captain coolly told her the truth. She had been sharp enough to suspect Mr. Noel Vanstone of coming to the house in the character of a sweetheart on approval; and she had dimly interpreted certain expressions of impatience which had fallen from Magdalen's lips, as boding ill for the success of his suit—but her utmost penetration had never reached as far as a suspicion of the impending marriage. She rose from one climax of amazement to another, as her husband proceeded with his disclosure. A wedding in the family at a day's notice! and that wedding Magdalen's! and not a single new dress ordered for anybody, the bride included! and the Oriental Cashmere Robe totally unavailable, on the occasion when she might have worn it to the greatest advantage! Mrs. Wragge dropped crookedly into a chair, and beat her disorderly hands on her unsymmetrical knees, in utter forgetfulness of the captain's presence, and the captain's terrible eye. It would not have surprised her to hear next, that the world had come to an end, and that the only mortal whom Destiny had overlooked in winding up the affairs of this earthly planet, was herself!

Leaving his wife to recover her composure by her own unaided efforts, Captain Wragge withdrew to wait for Magdalen's appearance in the lower regions of the house. It was close on one o'clock before the sound of footsteps in the room above, warned him that she was awake and stirring. He called at once for the maid (whose name he had ascertained to be Louisa), and sent her up-stairs to her mistress for the second time.

Magdalen was standing by her dressing-table, when a faint tap at the door suddenly roused her. The tap was followed by the sound of a meek voice, which announced itself as the voice of 'her maid,5 and inquired if Miss Bygrave needed any assistance that morning.

'Not at present,' said Magdalen, as soon as she had recovered the surprise of finding herself unexpectedly provided with an attendant. 'I will ring when I want you.'

After dismissing the woman with that answer, she accidentally looked from the door to the window. Any speculations on the subject of the new servant in which she might otherwise have engaged, were instantly suspended by the sight of the bottle of laudanum, still standing on the ledge of the window, where she had left it at sunrise. She took it once more in her hand, with a strange confusion of feeling—with a vague doubt even yet, whether the sight of it reminded her of a terrible reality or a terrible dream. Her first impulse was' to rid herself of it on the spot. She raised the bottle to throw the contents out of the window—and paused, in sudden distrust

of the impulse that had come to her. ‘I have accepted my new life,’ she thought. ‘How do I know what that life may have in store for me?’ She turned from the window, and went back to the table. ‘I may be forced to drink it yet,’ she said—and put the laudanum into her dressing-case.

Her mind was not at ease when she had done this: there seemed to be some indefinable ingratitude in the act. Still she made no attempt to remove the bottle from its hiding-place. She hurried on her toilette; she hastened the time when she could ring for the maid, and forget herself and her waking thoughts in a new subject. After touching the bell, she took from the table her letter to Norah and her letter to the captain; put them both into her dressing-case with the laudanum; and locked it securely with the key which she kept attached to her watch-chain.

Magdalen’s first impression of her attendant was not an agreeable one. She could not investigate the girl with the experienced eye of the landlady at the London hotel, who had characterized the stranger as a young person overtaken by misfortune; and who had showed plainly by her look and manner, of what nature she suspected that misfortune to be. But, with this drawback, Magdalen was perfectly competent to detect the tokens of sickness and sorrow, lurking under the surface of the new maid’s activity and politeness. She suspected the girl was ill tempered; she disliked her name; and she was indisposed to welcome any servant who had been engaged by Noel Vanstone. But after the first few minutes, ‘Louisa’ grew on her liking. She answered all the questions put to her, with perfect directness; she appeared to understand her duties thoroughly; and she never spoke until she was spoken to first. After making all the inquiries that occurred to her at the time, and after determining to give the maid a fair trial, Magdalen rose to leave the room. The very air in it was still heavy to her with the oppression of the past night.

‘Have you anything more to say to me?’ she asked, turning to the servant, with her hand on the door.

‘I beg your pardon, Miss,’ said Louisa, very respectfully and very quietly. ‘I think my master told me that the marriage was to be to-morrow?’

Magdalen repressed the shudder that stole over her, at that reference to the marriage on the lips of a stranger, and answered in the affirmative.

‘It’s a very short time, Miss, to prepare in. If you would be so kind as to give me my orders about the packing before you go down stairs———?’

‘There are no such preparations to make as you suppose,’ said Magdalen, hastily. ‘The few things I have here, can be all packed at once, if you like. I shall wear the same dress to-morrow which I have on to-day. Leave out the straw bonnet, and the light shawl, and put everything else into my boxes. I have no new dresses to pack—I have nothing ordered for the occasion, of any sort.’ She tried to add some commonplace phrases of explanation, accounting as probably as might be, for the absence of the usual wedding outfit, and wedding-dress. But no further reference to the marriage would pass her lips, and without another word she abruptiy left the room.

The meek and melancholy Louisa stood lost in astonishment. ‘Something wrong here,’ she thought. ‘I’m half afraid of my new place already.’ She sighed resignedly—shook her head—and went to the wardrobe. She first examined the drawers underneath; took out the various articles of linen laid inside; and placed them on chairs. Opening the upper part of the wardrobe next, she ranged the dresses in it side by side on the bed. Her last proceeding was to push the empty boxes into the middle of the room, and to compare the space at her disposal with the articles of dress which she had to pack. She completed her preliminary calculations with the ready self-reliance of a woman who thoroughly understood her business, and began the packing forthwith. Just as she had placed the first article of linen in the smaller box, the door of the room opened; and the house-servant, eager for

gossip, came in.

‘What do you want?’ asked Louisa, quietly.

‘Did you ever hear of anything like this!’ said the house-servant, entering on her subject immediately.

‘Like what?’

‘Like this marriage, to be sure. You’re London bred, they tell me. Did you ever hear of a young lady being married, without a single new thing to her back? No wedding veil, and no wedding breakfast, and no wedding favours for the servants. It’s flying in the face of Providence—that’s what I say. I’m only a poor servant, I know. But it’s wicked, downright wicked—and I don’t care who hears me!’

Louisa went on with the packing.

‘Look at her dresses!’ persisted the house-servant, waving her hand indignantly at the bed. ‘I’m only a poor girl—but I wouldn’t marry the best man alive without a new gown to my back. Look here! look at this dowdy brown thing here. Alpaca! You’re not going to pack this Alpaca thing, are you? Why it’s hardly fit for a servant! I don’t know that I’d take a gift of it if it was offered me. It would do for me if I took it up in the skirt, and let it out in the waist—and it wouldn’t look so bad with a bit of bright trimming, would it?’

‘Let that dress alone, if you please,’ said Louisa, as quietly as ever.

‘What did you say?’ inquired the other, doubting whether her ears had not deceived her.

‘I said—let that dress alone. It belongs to my mistress; and I have my mistress’s orders to pack up everything in the room. You are not helping me by coming here—you are very much in my way.’

‘Well!’ said the house-servant, ‘you may be London bred, as they say. But if these are your London manners—give me Suffolk!’ She opened the door, with an angry snatch at the handle, shut it violently, opened it again, and looked in. ‘Give me Suffolk!’ said the house-servant, with a parting nod of her head to point the edge of her sarcasm.

Louisa proceeded impenetrably with her packing up.

Having neatly disposed of the linen in the smaller box, she turned her attention to the dresses next. After passing them carefully in review, to ascertain which was the least valuable of the collection, and to place that one at the bottom of the trunk for the rest to lie on, she made her choice with very little difficulty. The first gown which she put into the box, was—the brown Alpaca dress.

Meanwhile, Magdalen had joined the captain down stairs. Although he could not fail to notice the languor in her face and the listlessness of all her movements, he was relieved to find that she met him with perfect composure. She was even self-possessed enough to ask him for news of his journey, with no other signs of agitation than a passing change of colour, and a little trembling of the lips.

‘So much for the past,’ said Captain Wragge, when his narrative of the expedition to London, by way of St. Crux, had come to an end. ‘Now for the present. The bridegroom———’

‘If it makes no difference,’ she interposed, ‘call him Mr. Noel Vanstone.’

‘With all my heart. Mr. Noel Vanstone is coming here this afternoon to dine and spend the evening. He will be tiresome in the last degree—but like all tiresome people, he is not to be got rid of on any terms. Before he

comes, I have a last word or two of caution for your private ear. By this time to-morrow we shall have parted—without any certain knowledge, on either side, of our ever meeting again. I am anxious to serve your interests faithfully to the last—I am anxious you should feel that I have done all I could for your future security, when we say good-bye.'

Magdalen looked at him in surprise. He spoke in altered tones. He was agitated; he was strangely in earnest. Something in his look and manner took her memory back to the first night at Aldborough, when she had opened her mind to him in the darkening solitude—when they two had sat together alone, on the slope of the martello tower.

'I have no reason to think otherwise than kindly of you,' she said.

Captain Wragge suddenly left his chair, and took a turn backwards and forwards in the room. Magdalen's last words seemed to have produced some extraordinary disturbance in him.

'Damn it!' he broke out; 'I can't let you say that. You have reason to think ill of me. I have cheated you. You never got your fair share of profit from the Entertainment, from first to last. There! now the murder's out!'

Magdalen smiled, and signed to him to come back to his chair.

'I know you cheated me,' she said, quietly. 'You were in the exercise of your profession, Captain Wragge. I expected it when I joined you. I made no complaint at the time; and I make none now. If the money you took is any recompense for all the trouble I have given you, you are heartily welcome to it.'

'Will you shake hands on that?' asked the captain, with an awkwardness and hesitation, strongly at variance with his customary case of manner.

Magdalen gave him her hand. He wrung it hard. 'You are a strange girl,' he said, trying to speak lightly. 'You have laid a hold on me that I don't quite understand. I'm half uncomfortable at taking the money from you, now—and yet, you don't want it, do you?' He hesitated. 'I almost wish,' he said, 'I had never met you on the walls of York.'

'It is too late to wish that, Captain Wragge. Say no more. You only distress me—say no more. We have other subjects to talk about. What were those words of caution which you had for my private ear?'

The captain took another turn in the room, and struggled back again into his every-day character. He produced from his pocket-book Mrs. Lecount's letter to her master, and handed it to Magdalen.

'There is the letter that might have ruined us, if it had ever reached its address,' he said. 'Read it carefully. I have a question to ask you when you have done.'

Magdalen read the letter. 'What is this proof,' she inquired, 'which Mrs. Lecount relies on so confidently?'

'The very question I was going to ask you,' said Captain Wragge. 'Consult your memory of what happened, when you tried that experiment in Vauxhall Walk. Did Mrs. Lecount get no other chance against you, than the chances you have told me of already?'

'She discovered that my face was disguised, and she heard me speak in my own voice.'

'And nothing more?'

'Nothing more.'

‘Very good. Then my interpretation of the letter is clearly the right one. The proof Mrs. Lecount relies on, is my wife’s infernal ghost story—which is, in plain English, the story of Miss Bygrave having been seen in Miss Vanstone’s disguise; the witness being the very person who is afterwards presented at Aldborough, in the character of Miss Bygrave’s aunt. An excellent chance for Mrs. Lecount, if she can only lay her hand at the right time on Mrs. Wragge—and no chance at all, if she can’t. Make your mind easy on that point. Mrs. Lecount and my wife have seen the last of each other. In the mean time, don’t neglect the warning I give you, in giving you this letter. Tear it up, for fear of accidents—but don’t forget it.’

‘Trust me to remember it,’ replied Magdalen, destroying the letter while she spoke. ‘Have you anything more to tell me?’

‘I have some information to give you,’ said Captain Wragge, ‘which may be useful, because it relates to your future security. Mind, I want to know nothing about your proceedings when to-morrow is over—we settled that when we first discussed this matter. I ask no questions, and I make no guesses. All I want to do now, is to warn you of your legal position, after your marriage; and to leave you to make what use you please of your knowledge, at your own sole discretion. I took a lawyer’s opinion on the point, when I was in London, thinking it might be useful to you.’

‘It is sure to be useful. What did the lawyer say?’

‘To put it plainly, this is what he said. If Mr. Noel Vanstone ever discovers that you have knowingly married him under a false name, he can apply to the Ecclesiastical Court to have his marriage declared null and void. The issue of the application would rest with the Judges. But if he could prove that he had been intentionally deceived, the legal opinion is that his case would be a strong one.’

‘Suppose I chose to apply on my side?’ said Magdalen, eagerly. ‘What then?’

‘You might make the application,’ replied the captain. ‘But remember one thing—you would come into Court, with the acknowledgment of your own deception. I leave you to imagine what the Judges would think of that.’

‘Did the lawyer tell you anything else?’

‘One thing besides,’ said Captain Wragge. ‘Whatever the law might do with the marriage in the lifetime of both the parties to it—on the death of either one of them, no application made by the survivor would avail; and, as to the case of that survivor, the marriage would remain valid. You understand? If he dies, or if you die—and if no application has been made to the Court—he the survivor, or you the survivor, would have no power of disputing the marriage. But, in the lifetime of both of you, if he claimed to have the marriage dissolved, the chances are all in favour of his carrying his point.’

He looked at Magdalen with a furtive curiosity as he said those words. She turned her head aside, absently tying her watch-chain into a loop and untying it again; evidently thinking with the closest attention over what he had last said to her. Captain Wragge walked uneasily to the window, and looked out. The first object that caught his eye was Mr. Noel Vanstone approaching from Sea View. He returned instantly to his former place in the room, and addressed himself to Magdalen once more.

‘Here is Mr. Noel Vanstone,’ he said. ‘One last caution before he comes in. Be on your guard with him about your age. He put the question to me before he got the Licence. I took the shortest way out of the difficulty, and told him you were Twenty-one—and he made the declaration accordingly. Never mind about *me;* after to-morrow, I am invisible. But, in your own interests, don’t forget, if the subject turns up, that you were of age when you married. There is nothing more. You are provided with every necessary warning that I can give you.

Whatever happens in the future—remember I have done my best.'

He hurried to the door, without waiting for an answer, and went out into the garden to receive his guest.

Noel Vanstone made his appearance at the gate, solemnly carrying his bridal offering to North Shingles with both hands. The object in question was an ancient casket (one of his father's bargains); inside the casket reposed an old-fashioned carbuncle brooch, set in silver (another of his father's bargains)—bridal presents both, possessing the inestimable merit of leaving his money undisturbed in his pocket. He shook his head portentously when the captain inquired after his health and spirits. He had passed a wakeful night; ungovernable apprehensions of Lecount's sudden reappearance had beset him as soon as he found himself alone at Sea View. Sea View was redolent of Lecount: Sea View (though built on piles, and the strongest house in England) was henceforth odious to him. He had felt this all night; he had also felt his responsibilities. There was the lady's maid, to begin with. Now he had hired her, he began to think she wouldn't do. She might fall sick on his hands; she might have deceived him by a false character; she and the landlady of the hotel might have been in league together. Horrible! Really horrible to think of. Then there was the other responsibility—perhaps the heaviest of the two—the responsibility of deciding where he was to go and spend his honeymoon to-morrow. He would have preferred one of his father's empty houses. But, except at Vauxhall Walk (which he supposed would be objected to), and at Aldborough (which was of course out of the question), all the houses were let. He would put himself in Mr. Bygrave's hands. Where had Mr. Bygrave spent his own honeymoon? Given the British Islands to choose from, where would Mr. Bygrave pitch his tent, on a careful review of all the circumstances?

At this point, the bridegroom's questions suddenly came to an end, and the bridegroom's face exhibited an expression of ungovernable astonishment. His judicious friend whose advice had been at his disposal in every other emergency, suddenly turned round on him, in the emergency of the honeymoon, and flatly declined discussing the subject.

'No!' said the captain, as Noel Vanstone opened his lips to plead for a hearing, 'you must really excuse me. My point of view, in this matter, is, as usual, a peculiar one. For some time past, I have been living in an atmosphere of deception, to suit your convenience. That atmosphere, my good sir, is getting close—my Moral Being requires ventilation. Settle the choice of a locality with my niece; and leave me, at my particular request, in total ignorance of the subject. Mrs. Lecount is certain to come here on her return from Zurich, and is certain to ask me where you are gone. You may think it strange, Mr. Vanstone—but when I tell her I don't know, I wish to enjoy the unaccustomed luxury of feeling, for once in a way, that I am speaking the truth!'

With those words, he opened the sitting-room door; introduced Noel Vanstone to Magdalen's presence; bowed himself out of the room again; and set forth alone to while away the rest of the afternoon by taking a walk. His face showed plain tokens of anxiety, and his parti-coloured eyes looked hither and thither distrustfully, as he sauntered along the shore. 'The time hangs heavy on our hands,' thought the captain. 'I wish to-morrow was come and gone.'

The day passed and nothing happened; the evening and the night followed, placidly and uneventfully. Monday came, a cloudless lovely day—Monday confirmed the captain's assertion that the marriage was a certainty. Towards ten o'clock, the clerk ascending the church steps, quoted the old proverb to the pew-opener, meeting him under the porch: 'Happy the bride on whom the sun shines!'

In a quarter of an hour more, the wedding party was in the vestry, and the clergyman led the way to the altar. Carefully as the secret of the marriage had been kept, the opening of the church in the morning had been enough to betray it. A small congregation, almost entirely composed of women, was scattered here and there among the pews. Kirke's sister and her children were staying with a friend at Aldborough—and Kirke's sister was one of

the congregation.

As the wedding party entered the church, the haunting terror of Mrs. Lecount spread from Noel Vanstone to the captain. For the first few minutes, the eyes of both of them looked among the women in the pews, with the same searching scrutiny; and looked away again with the same sense of relief. The clergyman noticed that look, and investigated the Licence more closely than usual. The clerk began to doubt privately whether the old proverb about the bride, was a proverb to be always depended on. The female members of the congregation murmured among themselves at the inexcusable disregard of appearances implied in the bride's dress. Kirke's sister whispered venomously in her friend's ear, 'Thank God for to-day for Robert's sake.' Mrs. Wragge cried silendy, with the dread of some threatening calamity, she knew not what. The one person present who remained outwardly undisturbed was Magdalen herself. She stood with tearless resignation in her place before the altar—stood, as if all the sources of human emotion were frozen up within her.

The clergyman opened the Book.

It was done. The awful words which speak from earth to Heaven were pronounced. The children of the two dead brothers—inheritors of the implacable enmity which had parted their parents—were Man and Wife.

From that moment, events hurried with a headlong rapidity to the parting scene. They were back at the house, while the words of the Marriage Service seemed still ringing in their ears. Before they had been five minutes indoors, the carriage drew up at the garden gate. In a minute more, the opportunity came for which Magdalen and the captain had been on the watch—the opportunity of speaking together in private for the last time. She still preserved her icy resignation—she seemed beyond all reach now of the fear that had once mastered her, of the remorse that had once tortured her to the soul. With a firm hand, she gave him the promised money. With a firm face, she looked her last at him. 'I'm not to blame,' he whispered eagerly; 'I have only done what you asked me.' She bowed her head—she bent it towards him kindly, and let him touch her forehead with his lips. 'Take care!' he said. 'My last words are—for God's sake take care when I'm gone!' She turned from him with a smile, and spoke her farewell words to his wife. Mrs. Wragge tried hard to face her loss bravely—the loss of the friend whose presence had fallen like light from Heaven over the dim pathway of her life. 'You have been very good to me, my dear; I thank you kindly; I thank you with all my heart.' She could say no more—she clung to Magdalen, in a passion of tears, as her mother might have clung to her, if her mother had lived to see that horrible day. 'I'm frightened for you!' cried the poor creature in a wild wailing voice. 'Oh, my darling, I'm frightened for you!' Magdalen desperately drew herself free—kissed her—and hurried out to the door. The expression of that artless gratitude, the cry of that guileless love, shook her as nothing else had shaken her that day. It was a refuge to get to the carriage—a refuge, though the man she had married stood there waiting for her at the door.

Mrs. Wragge tried to follow her into the garden. But the captain had seen Magdalen's face as she ran out; and he steadily held his wife back in the passage. From that distance, the last farewells were exchanged. As long as the carriage was in sight, Magdalen looked back at them—she waved her handkerchief, as she turned the comer. In a moment more, the last thread which bound her to them was broken; the familiar companionship of many months was a thing of the past already!

Captain Wragge closed the house-door on the idlers who were looking in from the Parade. He led his wife back into the sitting-room, and spoke to her with a forbearance which she had never yet experienced from him.

'She has gone her way,' he said, 'and in another hour we shall have gone ours. Cry your cry out—I don't deny she's worth crying for.'

Even then—even when the dread of Magdalen's future was at its darkest in his mind—the ruling habit of the man's life clung to him. Mechanically, he unlocked his despatch-box. Mechanically, he opened his Book of Accounts, and made the closing entry—the entry of his last transaction with Magdalen—in black and white. 'By Recd from Miss Vanstone,' wrote the captain, with a gloomy brow, 'Two hundred pounds.'

'You won't be angry with me?' said Mrs. Wragge, looking timidly at her husband through her tears. 'I want a word of comfort, captain. Oh, do tell me—when shall I see her again?'

The captain closed the book, and answered in one inexorable word:

'Never!'

Between eleven and twelve o'clock that night, Mrs. Lecount drove into Zurich.

Her brother's house, when she stopped before it, was shut up. With some difficulty and delay the servant was aroused. She held up her hands in speechless amazement, when she opened the door, and saw who the visitor was.

'Is my brother alive?' asked Mrs. Lecount, entering the house.

'Alive!' echoed the servant. 'He has gone holiday-making into the country, to finish his recovery in the fine fresh air.'

The housekeeper staggered back against the wall of the passage. The coachman and the servant put her into a chair. Her face was livid, and her teeth chattered in her head.

'Send for my brother's doctor,' she said, as soon as she could speak.

The doctor came. She handed him a letter, before he could say a word.

'Did you write that letter?'

He looked it over rapidly, and answered her without hesitation.

'Certainly not!'

'It is your handwriting.'

'It is a forgery of my handwriting.'

She rose from the chair, with a new strength in her.

'When does the return mail start for Paris?' she asked.

'In half an hour.'

'Send instantly, and take me a place in it!'

The servant hesitated; the doctor protested. She turned a deaf ear to them both.

'Send!' she reiterated, 'or I will go myself.'

They obeyed. The servant went to take the place: the doctor remained, and held a conversation with Mrs. Lecount. When the half-hour had passed, he helped her into her place in the mail, and charged the conductor

privately to take care of his passenger.

‘She has travelled from England without stopping,’ said the doctor; ‘and she is travelling back again without rest. Be careful of her, or she will break down under the double journey.’

The mail started. Before the first hour of the new day was at an end, Mrs. Lecount was on her way back to England.

the end of the fourth scene

Between the Scenes

Progress of the Story through the Post

Wilkie Collins

I. *From George Bartram to Noel Vanstone*

‘St. Crux, September 4th, 1847.

‘My Dear Noel,

‘Here are two plain questions at starting. In the name of all that is mysterious, what are you hiding for? And why is everything relating to your marriage kept an impenetrable secret from your oldest friends?

‘I have been to Aldborough to try if I could trace you from that place; and have come back as wise as I went. I have applied to your lawyer in London; and have been told in reply, that you have forbidden him to disclose the place of your retreat to any one, without first receiving your permission to do so. All I could prevail on him to say was, that he would forward any letter which might be sent to his care. I write accordingly—and, mind this, I expect an answer.

‘You may ask, in your ill-tempered way, what business I have to meddle with affairs of yours, which it is your pleasure to keep private. My dear Noel, there is a serious reason for our opening communications with you from this house. You don’t know what events have taken place at St. Crux, since you ran away to get married; and though I detest writing letters, I must lose an hour’s shooting to-day in trying to enlighten you.

‘On the twenty-third of last month, the admiral and I were disturbed over our wine after dinner, by the announcement that a visitor had unexpectedly arrived at St. Crux. Who do you think the visitor was? Mrs. Lecount!

‘My uncle, with that old-fashioned bachelor gallantry of his, which pays equal respect to all wearers of petticoats, left the table directly to welcome Mrs. Lecount. While I was debating whether I should follow him or not, my meditations were suddenly brought to an end by a loud call from the admiral. I ran into the morning-room—and there was your unfortunate housekeeper, on the sofa, with all the women-servants about her, more dead than alive. She had travelled from England to Zurich, and from Zurich back again to England, without stopping; and she looked, seriously and literally, at death’s door. I immediately agreed with my uncle, that the first thing to be done was to send for medical help. We despatched a groom on the spot; and at Mrs. Lecount’s own request, sent all the servants, in a body, out of the room.

‘As soon as we were alone, Mrs. Lecount surprised us by a singular question. She asked if you had received a

letter which she had addressed to you before leaving England, at this house. When we told her that the letter had been forwarded, under cover to your friend Mr. Bygrave, by your own particular request, she turned as pale as ashes; and when we added that you had left us in company with this same Mr. Bygrave, she clasped her hands and stared at us as if she had taken leave of her senses. Her next question was, "Where is Mr. Noel, now?" We could only give her one reply—Mr. Noel had not informed us. She looked perfectly thunderstruck at that answer. "He has gone to his ruin!" she said. "He has gone away in company with the greatest villain in England. I must find him! I tell you I must find Mr. Noel! If I don't find him at once, it will be too late. He will be married!" she burst out quite frantically. "On my honour and my oath he will be married!" The admiral, incautiously perhaps, but with the best intentions, told her you were married already. She gave a scream that made the windows ring again, and dropped back on the sofa in a fainting fit. The doctor came, in the nick of time, and soon brought her to. But she was taken ill the same night—she has grown worse and worse ever since—and the last medical report is, that the fever from which she has been suffering is in a fair way to settle on her brain.

'Now, my dear Noel, neither my uncle nor I have any wish to intrude ourselves on your confidence. We are naturally astonished at the extraordinary mystery which hangs over you and your marriage; and we cannot be blind to the fact that your housekeeper has, apparently, some strong reason of her own for viewing Mrs. Noel Vanstone with an enmity and distrust, which we are quite ready to believe that lady has done nothing to deserve. Whatever strange misunderstanding there may have been in your household, is your business (if you choose to keep it to yourself), and not ours. All we have any right to do, is to tell you what the doctor says. His patient has been delirious; he declines to answer for her life if she goes on as she is going on now; and he thinks—finding that she is perpetually talking of her master—that your presence would be useful in quieting her, if you could come here at once, and exert your influence before it is too late.

'What do you say? Will you emerge from the darkness that surrounds you, and come to St. Crux? If this was the case of an ordinary servant, I could understand your hesitating to leave the delights of your honeymoon for any such object as is here proposed to you. But, my dear fellow, Mrs. Lecount is not an ordinary servant. You are under obligations to her fidelity and attachment, in your father's time, as well as in your own; and if you *can* quiet the anxieties which seem to be driving this unfortunate woman mad, I really think you ought to come here and do so. Your leaving Mrs. Noel Vanstone is of course out of the question. There is no necessity for any such hardhearted proceeding. The admiral desires me to remind you that he is your oldest friend living, and that his house is at your wife's disposal, as it has always been at yours. In this great rambling place she need dread no near association with the sick-room; and, with all my uncle's oddities, I am sure she will not think the offer of his friendship an offer to be despised.

'Have I told you already that I went to Aldborough to try and find a clue to your whereabouts? I can't be at the trouble of looking back to see; so, if I have told you, I tell you again. The truth is, I made an acquaintance at Aldborough of whom you know something—at least, by report.

'After applying vainly at Sea View, I went to the hotel to inquire about you. The landlady could give me no information; but the moment I mentioned your name, she asked if I was related to you—and when I told her I was your cousin, she said there was a young lady then at the hotel, whose name was Vanstone also; who was in great distress about a missing relative; and who might prove of some use to me—or I to her—if we knew of each other's errand at Aldborough. I had not the least idea who she was; but I sent in my card at a venture; and, in five minutes afterwards, I found myself in the presence of one of the most charming women these eyes ever looked on.

'Our first words of explanation informed me that my family name was known to her by repute. Who do you

think she was? The eldest daughter of my uncle and yours—Andrew Vanstone. I had often heard my poor mother, in past years, speak of her brother Andrew; and I knew of that sad story at Combe-Raven. But our families, as you are aware, had always been estranged; and I had never seen my charming cousin before. She has the dark eyes and hair, and the gentle retiring manners that I always admire in a woman. I don't want to renew our old disagreement about your father's conduct to those two sisters, or to deny that his brother Andrew may have behaved badly to him—I am willing to admit that the high moral position he took in the matter is quite unassailable by such a miserable sinner as I am—and I will not dispute that my own spendthrift habits incapacitate me from offering any opinion on the conduct of other people's pecuniary affairs. But, with all these allowances and drawbacks, I can tell you one thing, Noel. If you ever see the elder Miss Vanstone, I venture to prophesy that, for the first time in your life, you will doubt the propriety of following your father's example.

'She told me her little story, poor thing, most simply and unaffectedly. She is now occupying her second situation as a governess—and, as usual, I, who know everybody, know the family. They are friends of my uncle's, whom he has lost sight of latterly—the Tyrrels of Portland Place—and they treat Miss Vanstone with as much kindness and consideration as if she was a member of the family. One of their old servants accompanied her to Aldborough; her object in travelling to that place being what the landlady of the hotel had stated it to be. The family reverses have, it seems, had a serious effect on Miss Vanstone's younger sister, who has left her friends, and who has been missing from home for some time. She had been last heard of at Aldborough; and her elder sister, on her return from the Continent with the Tyrrels, had instantly set out to make inquiries at that place.

'This was all Miss Vanstone told me. She asked whether you had seen anything of her sister, or whether Mrs. Lecount knew anything of her sister—I suppose because she was aware you had been at Aldborough. Of course I could tell her nothing. She entered into no details on the subject, and I could not presume to ask her for any. All I did was to set to work with might and main to assist her inquiries. The attempt was an utter failure—nobody could give us any information. We tried personal description of course; and, strange to say, the only young lady formerly staying at Aldborough, who answered the description, was, of all the people in the world, the lady you have married! If she had not had an uncle and aunt (both of whom have left the place), I should have begun to suspect that you had married your cousin without knowing it! Is this the clue to the mystery? Don't be angry; I must have my little joke, and I can't help writing as carelessly as I talk. The end of it was, our inquiries were all baffled, and I travelled back with Miss Vanstone and her attendant, as far as our station here. I think I shall call on the Tyrrels, when I am next in London. I have certainly treated that family with the most inexcusable neglect.

'Here I am at the end of my third sheet of note paper! I don't often take the pen in hand; but when I do, you will agree with me, that I am in no hurry to lay it aside again. Treat the rest of my letter as you like—but consider what I have told you about Mrs. Lecount, and remember that time is of consequence.

'Ever yours,

George Bartram.'

II. *From Norah Vanstone to Miss Garth*

'Portland Place.

‘My dear Miss Garth,

‘More sorrow, more disappointment! I have just returned from Aldborough, without making any discovery. Magdalen is still lost to us.

‘I cannot attribute this new overthrow of my hopes to any want of perservance or penetration in making the necessary inquiries. My inexperience in such matters was most kindly and unexpectedly assisted by Mr. George Bartram. By a strange Coincidence, he happened to be at Aldborough, inquiring after Mr. Noel Vanstone, at the very time when I was there inquiring after Magdalen. He sent in his card, and knowing when I looked at the name, that he was my cousin—if I may call him so—I thought there would be no impropriety in my seeing him, and asking his advice. I abstained from entering into particulars, for Magdalen’s sake; and I made no allusion to that letter of Mrs. Lecount’s which you answered for me. I only told him Magdalen was missing, and had been last heard of at Aldborough. The kindness which he showed in devoting himself to my assistance, exceeds all description. He treated me, in my forlorn situation, with a delicacy and respect, which I shall remember gratefully, long after he has himself perhaps forgotten our meeting altogether. He is quite young—not more than thirty, I should think. In face and figure, he reminded me a little of the portrait of my father at Combe-Raven—I mean the portrait in the dining-room, of my father when he was a young man.

‘Useless as our inquiries were, there is one result of them which has left a very strange and shocking impression on my mind.

‘It appears that Mr. Noel Vanstone has lately married, under mysterious circumstances, a young lady whom he met with at Aldborough, named Bygrave. He has gone away with his wife, telling nobody but his lawyer where he has gone to. This I heard from Mr. George Bartram, who was endeavouring to trace him, for the purpose of communicating the news of his housekeeper’s serious illness—the housekeeper being the same Mrs. Lecount whose letter you answered. So far, you may say, there is nothing which need particularly interest either of us. But I think you will be as much surprised as I was, when I tell you that the description given by the people at Aldborough of Miss Bygrave’s appearance, is most startlingly and unaccountably like the description of Magdalen’s appearance. This discovery, taken in connection with all the circumstances we know of, has had an effect on my mind, which I cannot describe to you—which I dare not realize to myself. Pray come and see me! I have never felt so wretched about Magdalen as I feel now. Suspense must have weakened my nerves in some strange way. I feel superstitious about the slightest things. This accidental resemblance of a total stranger to Magdalen, fills me, every now and then, with the most horrible misgivings—merely because Mr. Noel Vanstone’s name happens to be mixed up with it. Once more, pray come to me—I have so much to say to you that I cannot, and dare not, say in writing.

‘Gratefully and affectionately yours,

‘Norah.’

III. *From Mr. John Loscombe (Solicitor) to George Bartram, Esq*

‘Lincoln’s Inn, London.

‘September 6th, 1847.

‘Sir,

‘I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your note, enclosing a letter addressed to my client, Mr. Noel Vanstone, and requesting that I will forward the same to Mr. Vanstone’s present address.

‘Since I last had the pleasure of communicating with you on this subject, any position towards my client is entirely altered. Three days ago, I received a letter from him which stated his intention of changing his place of residence on the next day then ensuing, but which left me entirely in ignorance on the subject of the locality to which it was his intention to remove. I have not heard from him since; and, as he had previously drawn on me for a larger sum of money than usual, there would be no present necessity for his writing to me again—assuming that it is his wish to keep his place of residence concealed from every one, myself included.

‘Under these circumstances, I think it right to return you your letter, with the assurance that I will let you know, if I happen to be again placed in a position to forward it to its destination.

‘Your obedient servant,

‘John Loscombe.’

IV. *From Norah Vanstone to Miss Garth*

‘Portland Place.

‘My dear Miss Garth,

‘Forget the letter I wrote to you yesterday, and all the gloomy forebodings that it contains. This morning’s post has brought new life to me. I have just received a letter, addressed to me at your house, and forwarded here, in your absence from home yesterday, by your sister. Can you guess who the writer is?—Magdalen!

‘The letter is very short; it seems to have been written in a hurry. She says she has been dreaming of me for some nights past, and the dreams have made her fear that her long silence has caused me more distress, on her account, than she is worth. She writes therefore to assure me that she is safe and well—that she hopes to see me before long—and that she has something to tell me, when we meet, which will try my sisterly love for her as nothing has tried it yet. The letter is not dated; but the postmark is “Allonby,” which I have found on referring to the Gazetteer, to be a little sea-side place in Cumberland. There is no hope of my being able to write back—for Magdalen expressly says that she is on the eve of departure from her present residence, and that she is not at liberty to say where she is going to next, or to leave instructions for forwarding any letters after her.

‘In happier times, I should have thought this letter very far from being a satisfactory one—and I should have been seriously alarmed by that allusion to a future confidence on her part which will try my love for her as nothing has tried it yet. But, after all the suspense I have suffered, the happiness of seeing her handwriting again seems to fill my heart, and to keep all other feelings out of it. I don’t send you her letter, because I know you are coming to me soon, and I want to have the pleasure of seeing you read it.

‘Ever affectionately yours,

‘Norah.

‘P.S. Mr. George Bartram called on Mrs. Tyrrel to-day. He insisted on being introduced to the children. When he was gone, Mrs. Tyrrel laughed in her good-humoured way, and said that his anxiety to see the children, looked to her mind, very much like an anxiety to see *me*. You may imagine how my spirits are improved, when I can occupy my pen in writing such nonsense as this!’

V. *From Mrs. Lecount to Mr. de Bleriot, General Agent, London*

‘St. Crux, October 23rd, 1847.

‘Dear Sir,

‘I have been long in thanking you for the kind letter which promises me your assistance, in friendly remembrance of the commercial relations formerly existing between my brother and yourself. The truth is, I have overtasked my strength on my recovery from a long and dangerous illness; and for the last ten days I have been suffering under a relapse. I am now better again, and able to enter on the business which you so kindly offer to undertake for me.

‘The person whose present place of abode it is of the utmost importance to me to discover, is Mr. Noel Vanstone. I have lived, for many years past, in this gendeman’s service as housekeeper; and not having received my formal dismissal, I consider myself in his service still. During my absence on the Continent, he was privately married at Aldborough, in Suffolk, on the eighteenth of August last. He left Aldborough the same day; taking his wife with him to some place of retreat which was kept a secret from everybody, except his lawyer, Mr. Loscombe, of Lincoln’s Inn. After a short time he again removed, on the 4th of September, without informing Mr. Loscombe, on this occasion, of his new place of abode. From that date to this, the lawyer has remained (or has pretended to remain) in total ignorance of where he now is. Application has been made to Mr. Loscombe, under the circumstances, to mention what that former place of residence was, of which Mr. Vanstone is known to have informed him. Mr. Loscombe has declined acceding to this request, for want of formal permission to disclose his client’s proceedings after leaving Aldborough. I have all these latter particulars from Mr. Loscombe’s correspondent—the nephew of the gentleman who owns this house, and whose charity has given me an asylum, during the heavy affliction of my sickness, under his own roof.

‘I believe the reasons which have induced Mr. Noel Vanstone to keep himself and his wife in hiding, are reasons which relate entirely to myself. In the first place, he is aware that the circumstances under which he has married, are such as to give me the right of regarding him with a just indignation. In the second place, he knows that my faithful services, rendered through a period of twenty years, to his father and to himself, forbid him, in common decency, to cast me out helpless on the world, without a provision for the end of my life. He is the meanest of living men, and his wife is the vilest of living women. As long as he can avoid fulfilling his obligations to me, he will; and his wife’s encouragement may be trusted to fortify him in his ingratitude.

‘My object in determining to find him out, is briefly this. His marriage has exposed him to consequences which a man of ten times his courage could not face without shrinking. Of those consequences he knows nothing. His wife knows, and keeps him in ignorance. I know, and can enlighten him. His security from the danger that threatens him, is in my hands alone; and he shall pay the price of his rescue, to the last farthing of the debt that justice claims for me as my due—no more and no less.

‘I have now laid my mind before you, as you told me, without reserve. You know why I want to find this man, and what I mean to do when I find him. I leave it to your sympathy for me, to answer the serious question that remains: How is the discovery to be made? If a first trace of them can be found, after their departure from Aldborough, I believe careful inquiry will suffice for the rest. The personal appearance of the wife, and the extraordinary contrast between her husband and herself, are certain to be remarked, and remembered, by every stranger who sees them.

‘When you favour me with your answer, please address it to “Care of Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, near Ossory, Essex.”

‘Your much obliged,

‘Virginie Lecount.’

VI. *From Mr. de Bleriot to Mrs. Lecount*

‘Dark’s Buildings, Kingsland,

‘October 25th, 1847.

‘Private and Confidential.

‘Dear Madam,

‘I hasten to reply to your favour of Saturday’s date. Circumstances have enabled me to forward your interests, by consulting a friend of mine, possessing great experience in the management of private inquiries of all sorts. I have placed your case before him (without mentioning names); and I am happy to inform you that my views and his views of the proper course to take, agree in every particular.

‘Both myself and friend, then, are of opinion that litde or nothing can be done towards tracing the parties you mention, until the place of their temporary residence after they left Aldborough, has been discovered first. If this can be done, the sooner it is done the better. Judging from your letter, some weeks must have passed since the lawyer received his information that they had shifted their quarters. As they are both remarkable-looking people, the strangers who may have assisted them on their travels have probably not forgotten them yet. Nevertheless, expedition is desirable.

‘The question for you to consider is, whether they may not possibly have communicated the address of which we stand in need, to some other person besides the lawyer. The husband may have written to members of his family, or the wife may have written to members of her family. Both myself and friend are of opinion that the latter chance is the likeliest of the two. If you have any means of access in the direction of the wife’s family, we strongly recommend you to make use of them. If not, please supply us with the names of any of her near relations or intimate female friends whom you know, and we will endeavour to get access for you.

‘In any case, we request you will at once favour us with the most exact personal description that can be written of both the parties. We may require your assistance, in this important particular, at five minutes’ notice. Favour us, therefore, with the description by return of post. In the mean time, we will endeavour to ascertain, on our side, whether any information is to be privately obtained at Mr. Loscombe’s office. The lawyer himself is

probably altogether beyond our reach. But if any one of his clerks can be advantageously treated with, on such terms as may not overtax your pecuniary resources, accept my assurance that the opportunity shall be made the most of, by,

‘Dear Madam,

‘Your faithful servant,

‘Alfred de Bleriot.’

VII. *From Mr. Pendril to Norah Vanstone*

‘Serle Street, October 27th, 1847.

‘My dear Miss Vanstone,

‘A lady, named Lecount (formerly attached to Mr. Noel Vanstone’s service, in the capacity of housekeeper), has called at my office this morning, and has asked me to furnish her with your address. I have begged her to excuse my immediate compliance with her request, and to favour me with a call to-morrow morning, when I shall be prepared to meet her with a definite answer.

‘My hesitation in this matter does not proceed from any distrust of Mrs. Lecount personally—for I know nothing whatever to her prejudice. But in making her request to me, she stated that the object of the desired interview was to speak to you privately on the subject of your sister. Forgive me for acknowledging that I determined to withhold the address, as soon as I heard this. You will make allowances for your old friend and your sincere well-wisher? You will not take it amiss, if I express my strong disapproval of your allowing yourself on any pretence whatever, to be mixed up for the future with your sister’s proceedings.

‘I will not distress you by saying more than this. But I feel too deep an interest in your welfare, and too sincere an admiration of the patience with which you have borne all your trials, to say less.

‘If I cannot prevail on you to follow my advice, you have only to say so, and Mrs. Lecount shall have your address to-morrow. In this case (which I cannot contemplate without the greatest unwillingness), let me at least recommend you to stipulate that Miss Garth shall be present at the interview. In any matter with which your sister is concerned, you may want an old friend’s advice and an old friend’s protection against your own generous impulses. If I could have helped you in this way, I would—but Mrs. Lecount gave me indirectly to understand that the subject to be discussed was of too delicate a nature to permit of my presence. Whatever this objection may be really worth, it cannot apply to Miss Garth, who has brought you both up from childhood. I say, again, therefore, if you see Mrs. Lecount, see her in Miss Garth’s company.

‘Always most truly yours,

‘William Pendril.’

VIII. From Morah Vanstone To Mr. Pendril

‘Portland Place, Wednesday.

‘Dear Mr. Pendril,

‘Pray don’t think I am ungrateful for your kindness. Indeed, indeed I am not! But I must see Mrs. Lecount. You were not aware when you wrote to me, that I had received a few lines from Magdalen—not telling me where she is, but holding out the hope of our meeting before long. Perhaps Mrs. Lecount may have something to say to me, on this very subject? Even if it should not be so, my sister—do what she may—is still my sister. I can’t desert her; I can’t turn my back on any one who comes to me in her name. You know, dear Mr. Pendril, I have always been obstinate on this subject; and you have always borne with me. Let me owe another obligation to you which I can never return—and bear with me still!

‘Need I say that I willingly accept that part of your advice which refers to Miss Garth? I have already written to beg that she will come here at four, to-morrow afternoon. When you see Mrs. Lecount, please inform her that Miss Garth will be with me, and that she will find us both ready to receive her here, to-morrow, at four o’clock.

‘Gratefully yours,

‘Norah Vanstone.’

IX. *From Mr. de Bleriot to Mrs. Lecount*

‘Dark’s Buildings, October 28th.

‘Private.

‘Dear Madam,

‘One of Mr. Loscombe’s clerks has proved amenable to a small pecuniary consideration, and has mentioned a circumstance which it may be of some importance to you to know.

‘Nearly a month since, accident gave the clerk in question an opportunity of looking into one of the documents on his master’s table, which had attracted his attention from a slight peculiarity in the form and colour of the paper. He had only time, during Mr. Loscombe’s momentary absence, to satisfy his curiosity by looking at the beginning of the document, and at the end. At the beginning, he saw the customary form used in making a will. At the end, he discovered the signature of Mr. Noel Vanstone; with the names of two attesting witnesses, and the date (of which he is quite certain)—*the thirtieth of September last*.

‘Before the clerk had time to make any further investigations, his master returned, sorted the papers on the table, and carefully locked up the will, in the strong box devoted to the custody of Mr. Noel Vanstone’s documents. It has been ascertained that, at the close of September, Mr. Loscombe was absent from the office. If he was then employed in superintending the execution of his client’s will—which is quite possible—it follows clearly that he was in the secret of Mr. Vanstone’s address, after the removal of the 4th of September; and if you can do nothing on your side, it may be desirable to have the lawyer watched on ours. In any case, it is certainly ascertained that Mr. Noel Vanstone has made his will, since his marriage. I leave you to draw your own conclusions from that fact, and remain, in the hope of hearing from you shortly,

‘Your faithful servant,

‘Alfred de Bleriot.’

X. *From Miss Garth to Mr. Pendril*

‘Portland Place, October 28th.

‘My dear Sir,

‘Mrs. Lecount has just left us. If it was not too late to wish, I should wish from the bottom of my heart, that Norah had taken your advice, and had refused to see her.

‘I write in such distress of mind, that I cannot hope to give you a clear and complete account of the interview. I can only tell you briefly what Mrs. Lecount has done, and what our situation now is. The rest must be left until I am more composed, and until I can speak to you personally.

‘You will remember my informing you of the letter which Mrs. Lecount addressed to Norah from Aldborough, and which I answered for her in her absence. When Mrs. Lecount made her appearance to-day, her first words announced to us that she had come to renew the subject. As well as I can remember it, this is what she said, addressing herself to Norah:

‘ “I wrote to you on the subject of your sister, Miss Vanstone, some litde time since; and Miss Garth was so good as to answer the letter. What I feared at that time has come true. Your sister has defied all my efforts to check her; she has disappeared in company with my master, Mr. Noel Vanstone; and she is now in a position of danger, which may lead to her disgrace and ruin at a moment’s notice. It is my interest to recover my master; it is your interest to save your sister. Tell me—for time is precious—have you any news of her?”

‘Norah answered, as well as her terror and distress would allow her, “I have had a letter, but there was no address on it” ‘Mrs. Lecount asked, “Was there no post-mark on the envelope?”

‘Norah said—“Yes; Allonby.”

‘ “Allonby is better than nothing,” said Mrs. Lecount. “Allonby may help you to trace her. Where is Allonby?”

‘Norah told her. It all passed in a minute. I had been too much confused and startled to interfere before; but I composed myself sufficiently to interfere now.

‘ “You have entered into no particulars,” I said. “You have only frightened us—you have told us nothing.”

‘ “You shall hear the particulars, ma’am,” said Mrs. Lecount; “and you and Miss Vanstone shall judge for yourselves, if I have frightened you without a cause.”

‘Upon this, she entered at once upon a long narrative, which I cannot—I might almost say, which I dare not—repeat. You will understand the horror we both felt, when I tell you the end. If Mrs. Lecount’s statement is to be relied on, Magdalen has carried her mad resolution of recovering her father’s fortune, to the last and most desperate extremity—she has married Michael Vanstone’s son, under a false name. Her husband is at this moment still persuaded that her maiden name was Bygrave, and that she is really the niece of a scoundrel who assisted her imposture, and whom I recognize by the description of him to have been Captain Wragge.

‘I spare you Mrs. Lecount’s cool avowal, when she rose to leave us, of her own mercenary motives in wishing to discover her master and to enlighten him. I spare you the hints she dropped of Magdalen’s purpose in contracting this infamous marriage. The one aim and object of my letter is, to implore you to assist me in quieting Norah’s anguish of mind. The shock she has received at hearing this news of her sister, is not the worst result of what has happened. She has persuaded herself that the answers she innocently gave in her distress, to Mrs. Lecount’s questions on the subject of her letter—the answers wrung from her under the sudden pressure of confusion and alarm—may be used to Magdalen’s prejudice by the woman who purposely startled her into giving the information. I can only prevent her from taking some desperate step on her side—some step by which she may forfeit the friendship and protection of the excellent people with whom she is now living—by reminding her that if Mrs. Lecount traces her master by means of the post-mark on the letter, we may trace Magdalen at the same time, and by the same means. Whatever objection you may personally feel to renewing the efforts for the rescue of this miserable girl, which failed so lamentably at York, I entreat you, for Norah’s sake, to take the same steps now which we took then. Send me the only assurance which will quiet her—the assurance, under your own hand, that the search on our side has begun. If you will do this, you may trust me when the time comes, to stand between these two sisters, and to defend Norah’s peace, character, and future prosperity, at any price.

‘Most sincerely yours,

‘Harriet Garth.’

XI. *From Mrs. Lecount to Mr. de Bleriot*

‘October 28th.

‘Dear Sir,

‘I have found the trace you wanted. Mrs. Noel Vanstone has written to her sister. The letter contains no address; but the post-mark is Allonby, in Cumberland. From Allonby, therefore, the inquiries must begin. You have already in your possession the personal description of both husband and wife. I urgently recommend you not to lose one unnecessary moment. If it is possible to send to Cumberland immediately on receipt of this letter, I beg you will do so.

‘I have another word to say before I close my note—a word about the discovery in Mr. Loscombe’s office.

‘It is no surprise to me, to hear that Mr. Noel Vanstone has made his will since his marriage; and I am at no loss to guess in whose favour the will is made. If I succeed in finding my master—let that person get the money if that person can! A course to follow in this matter has presented itself to my mind, since I received your letter—but my ignorance of details of business and intricacies of law, leaves me still uncertain whether my idea is capable of ready and certain execution. I know no professional person whom I can trust in this delicate and dangerous business. Is your large experience in other matters, large enough to help me in this? I will call at your office to-morrow at two o’clock, for the purpose of consulting you on the subject. It is of the greatest importance, when I next see Mr. Noel Vanstone, that he should find me thoroughly prepared beforehand, in this matter of the will.

‘Your much obliged servant,

‘Virginie Lecount.’

XII. *From Mr. Pendril to Miss Garth*

‘Serle Street, October 29th.

‘Dear Miss Garth,

‘I have only a moment to assure you of the sorrow with which I have read your letter. The circumstances under which you urge your request, and the reasons you give for making it, are sufficient to silence any objection I might otherwise feel to the course you propose. A trustworthy person, whom I have myself instructed, will start for Allonby today; and as soon as I receive any news from him, you shall hear of it by special messenger. Tell Miss Vanstone this, and pray add the sincere expression of my sympathy and regard.

‘Faithfully yours,

William Pendril.’

XIII. *From Mr. de Bleriot to Mrs. Lecount*

‘Dark’s Buildings, November 1st.

‘Dear Madam,

‘I have the pleasure of informing you that the discovery has been made, with far less trouble than I had anticipated.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Noel Vanstone have been traced across the Solway Firth, to Dumfries; and thence to a cottage, a few miles from the town, on the banks of the Nith. The exact address is, Baliol Cottage, near Dumfries.

‘This information, though easily hunted up, has nevertheless been obtained under rather singular circumstances.

‘Before leaving Allonby, the persons in my employ discovered, to their surprise, that a stranger was in the place pursuing the same inquiry as themselves. In the absence of any instructions preparing them for such an occurrence as this, they took their own view of the circumstance. Considering the man as an intruder on their business, whose success might deprive them of the credit and reward of making the discovery, they took advantage of their superiority in numbers, and of their being first in file field, and carefully misled the stranger before they ventured any further with their own investigations. I am in possession of the details of their proceedings—with which I need not trouble you. The end is, that this person, whoever he may be, was cleverly turned back southward, on a false scent, before the men in my employment crossed the Firth.

‘I mention the circumstance, as you may be better able than I am to find a clue to it, and as it may possibly be of a nature to induce you to hasten your journey.

‘Your faithful servant,

‘Alfred de Bleriot.’

XIV. *From Mrs. Lecount to Mr. de Bleriot*

‘November 1st.

‘Dear Sir,

‘One line to say that your letter has just reached me at my lodging in London. I think I know who sent the strange man to inquire at Allonby. It matters litde. Before he finds out his mistake, I shall be at Dumfries. My luggage is packed—and I start for the North by the next train.

‘Your deeply obliged,

‘Virginie Lecount.’

The Fifth Scene

Baliol Cottage, Dumfries

Wilkie Collins

Chapter I

Towards eleven o'clock, on the morning of the third of November, the breakfast-table at Baliol Cottage presented that essentially comfortless appearance which is caused by a meal in a state of transition—that is to say, by a meal prepared for two persons, which has been already eaten by one, and which has not yet been approached by the other. It must be a hardy appetite which can contemplate without a momentary discouragement, the battered egg-shell, the fish half-stripped to a skeleton, the crumbs in the plate, and the dregs in the cup. There is surely a wise submission to those weaknesses in human nature which must be respected and not reproved, in the sympathising rapidity with which servants in places of public refreshment, clear away all signs of the customer in the past, from the eyes of the customer in the present. Although his predecessor may have been the wife of his bosom or the child of his loins, no man can find himself confronted at table by the traces of a vanished eater, without a passing sense of injury in connection with the idea of his own meal.

Some such impression as this found its way into the mind of Mr. Noel Vanstone, when he entered the lonely breakfast-parlour at Baliol Cottage, shortly after eleven o'clock. He looked at the table with a frown, and rang the bell with an expression of disgust.

'Clear away this mess,' he said, when the servant appeared. 'Has your mistress gone?'

'Yes, sir—nearly an hour ago.'

'Is Louisa down-stairs?'

'Yes, sir.'

'When you have put the table right, send Louisa up to me.'

He walked away to the window. The momentary irritation passed away from his face; but it left an expression there which remained—an expression of pining discontent. Personally, his marriage had altered him for the worse. His wizen litde cheeks were beginning to shrink into hollows; his frail litde figure had already contracted a slight stoop. The former delicacy of his complexion had gone—the sickly paleness of it was all that remained. His thin flaxen moustachios were no longer pragmatically waxed and twisted into a curl: their weak feathery ends hung meekly pendent over the querulous corners of his mouth. If the ten or twelve weeks since his marriage had been counted by his looks, they might have reckoned as ten or twelve years. He stood at the

window mechanically picking leaves from a pot of heath placed in front of it, and drearily humming the forlorn fragment of a tune.

The prospect from the window overlooked the course of the Nith, at a bend of the river a few miles above Dumfries. Here and there, through wintry gaps in the wooded bank, broad tracts of the level cultivated valley met the eye. Boats passed on the river, and carts plodded along the high road on their way to Dumfries. The sky was clear; the November sun shone as pleasantly as if the year had been younger by two good months; and the view, noted in Scodand for its bright and peaceful charm, was presented at the best which its wintry aspect could assume. If it had been hidden in mist or drenched with rain, Mr. Noel Vanstone would, to all appearance, have found it as attractive as he found it now. He waited at the window until he heard Louisa's knock at the door—then turned back sullenly to the breakfast-table and told her to come in.

'Make the tea,' he said. 'I know nothing about it. I'm left here neglected. Nobody helps me.'

The discreet Louisa silently and submissively obeyed.

'Did your mistress leave any message for me,' he asked, 'before she went away?'

'No message in particular, sir. My mistress only said she should be too late if she waited breakfast any longer.'

'Did she say nothing else?'

'She told me at the carriage-door, sir, that she would most likely be back in a week.'

'Was she in good spirits at the carriage-door?'

'No, sir. I thought my mistress seemed very anxious and uneasy. Is there anything more I can do, sir?'

'I don't know. Wait a minute.'

He proceeded discontentedly with his breakfast. Louisa waited resignedly at the door.

'I think your mistress has been in bad spirits, lately,' he resumed, with a sudden outbreak of petulance.

'My mistress has not been very cheerful, sir.'

'What do you mean by not very cheerful? Do you mean to prevaricate? Am I nobody in the house? Am I to be kept in the dark about everything? Is your mistress to go away on her own affairs, and leave me at home like a child—and am I not even to ask a question about her? Am I to be prevaricated with by a servant? I won't be prevaricated with! Not very cheerful? What do you mean by not very cheerful?'

'I only meant that my mistress was not in good spirits, sir.'

'Why couldn't you say it then? Don't you know the value of words? The most dreadful consequences sometimes happen from not knowing the value of words. Did your mistress tell you she was going to London?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What did you think when your mistress told you she was going to London? Did you think it odd she was going without me?'

'I did not presume to think it odd, sir.—Is there anything more I can do for you, if you please, sir?'

‘What sort of a morning is it out? Is it warm? Is the sun on the garden?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Have you seen the sun yourself on the garden?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Get me my great-coat; I’ll take a litde turn. Has the man brushed it? Did you see the man brush it yourself? What do you mean by saying he has brushed it, when you didn’t see him? Let me look at the tails. If there’s a speck of dust on the tails, I’ll turn the man off!—Help me on with it.’

Louisa helped him on with his coat, and gave him his hat. He went out irritably. The coat was a large one (it had belonged to his father); the hat was a large one (it was a misfit purchased as a bargain by himself). He was submerged in his hat and coat; he looked singularly small, and frail, and miserable, as he slowly wended his way, in the wintry sunlight, down the garden-walk. The path sloped gently from the back of the house to the water-side, from which it was parted by a low wooden fence. After pacing backwards and forwards slowly for some little time, he stopped at the lower extremity of the garden; and leaning on the fence, looked down listlessly at the smooth flow of the river.

His thoughts still ran on the subject of his first fretful question to Louisa—he was still brooding over the circumstances under which his wife had left the cottage that morning, and over the want of consideration towards himself, implied in the manner of her departure. The longer he thought of his grievance, the more acutely he resented it. He was capable of great tenderness of feeling, where any injury to his sense of his own importance was concerned. His head drooped little by little on his arms, as they rested on the fence; and, in the deep sincerity of his mortification, he sighed bitterly.

The sigh was answered by a voice close at his side.

‘You were happier with *me*, sir,’ said the voice in accents of tender regret.

He looked up with a scream—literally with a scream—and confronted Mrs. Lecount.

Was it the spectre of the woman? or the woman herself? Her hair was white; her face had fallen away; her eyes looked out large, bright, and haggard over her hollow cheeks. She was withered and old. Her dress hung loose round her wasted figure; not a trace of its buxom autumnal beauty remained. The quietly impenetrable resolution, the smoothly insinuating voice—these were the only relics of the past which sickness and suffering had left in Mrs. Lecount.

‘Compose yourself, Mr. Noel,5 she said, gendy. ‘You have no cause to be alarmed at seeing me. Your servant, when I inquired, said you were in the garden; and I came here to find you. I have traced you out, sir, with no resentment against yourself, with no wish to distress you by so much as the shadow of a reproach. I come here, on what has been, and is still, the business of my life—your service.’

He recovered himself a little; but he was still incapable of speech. He held fast by the fence, and stared at her.

‘Try to possess your mind, sir, of what I say,’ proceeded Mrs. Lecount. ‘I have not come here as your enemy, but as your friend. I have been tried by sickness; I have been tried by distress. Nothing remains of me, but my heart. My heart forgives you; my heart, in your sore need—need which you have yet to feel—places me at your service. Take my arm, Mr. Noel. A little turn in the sun will help you to recover yourself.’

She put his hand through her arm, and marched him slowly up the garden-walk. Before she had been five minutes in his company, she had resumed full possession of him, in her own right.

‘Now down again, Mr. Noel,’ she said. ‘Gently down again, in this fine sunlight. I have much to say to you, sir, which you never expected to hear from me. Let me ask a little domestic question first. They told me, at the house door, Mrs. Noel Vanstone was gone away on a journey. Has she gone for long?’

Her master’s hand trembled on her arm, as she put that question. Instead of answering it, he tried faintly to plead for himself. The first words that escaped him were prompted by his first returning sense—the sense that his housekeeper had taken him into custody. He tried to make his peace with Mrs. Lecount.

‘I always meant to do something for you,’ he said, coaxingly. ‘You would have heard from me, before long. Upon my word and honour, Lecount, you would have heard from me, before long!’

‘I don’t doubt it, sir,’ replied Mrs. Lecount. ‘But for the present, never mind about Me. You, and your interests first.’

‘How did you come here?’ he asked, looking at her in astonishment. ‘How came you to find me out?’

‘It is a long story, sir; I will tell it you some other time. Let it be enough to say now, that I *have* found you. Will Mrs. Noel be back again at the house to-day? A litde louder, sir; I can hardly hear you. So! so! Not back again for a week! And where has she gone? To London, did you say? And what for?—I am not inquisitive, Mr. Noel; I am asking serious questions, under serious necessity. Why has your wife left you here, and gone to London by herself?’

They were down at the fence again as she made that last inquiry; and they waited, leaning against it, while Noel Vanstone answered. Her reiterated assurances that she bore him no malice were producing their effect; he was beginning to recover himself. The old helpless habit of addressing all his complaints to his housekeeper, was returning already with the reappearance of Mrs. Lecount—returning insidiously, in company with that besetting anxiety to talk about his grievances, which had got the better of him at the breakfast-table, and which had shown the wound inflicted on his vanity to his wife’s maid.

‘I can’t answer for Mrs. Noel Vanstone,’ he said, spitefully. ‘Mrs. Noel Vanstone has not treated me with the consideration which is my due. She has taken my permission for granted; and she has only thought proper to tell me that the object of her journey is to see her friends in London. She went away this morning, without bidding me good-bye. She takes her own way, as if I was nobody; she treats me like a child. You may not believe it, Lecount—but I don’t even know who her friends are. I am left quite in the dark—I am left to guess for myself that her friends in London are her uncle and aunt.’

Mrs. Lecount privately considered the question by the help of her own knowledge, obtained in London. She soon reached the obvious conclusion. After writing to her sister in the first instance, Magdalen had now in all probability, followed the letter in person. There was little doubt that the friends she had gone to visit in London, were her sister and Miss Garth.

‘Not her uncle and aunt, sir,’ resumed Mrs. Lecount, composedly. ‘A secret for your private ear! She has no uncle and aunt. Another litde turn before I explain myself—another litde turn to compose your spirits.’

She took him into custody once more; and marched him back towards the house.

‘Mr. Noel!’ she said, suddenly stopping in the middle of the walk. ‘Do you know what was the worst mischief you ever did yourself in your life? I will tell you. That worst mischief was sending me to Zurich.’

His hand began to tremble on her arm once more.

‘I didn’t do it!’ he cried, piteously. ‘It was all Mr. Bygrave.’

‘You acknowledge, sir, that Mr. Bygrave deceived *me*? proceeded Mrs. Lecount. ‘I am glad to hear that. You will be all the readier to make the next discovery which is waiting for you—the discovery that Mr Bygrave has deceived *you*. He is not here to slip through my fingers now; and I am not the helpless woman in this place that I was at Aldborough. Thank God!’

She uttered that devout exclamation through her set teeth. All her hatred of Captain Wragge hissed out of her lips in those two words.

‘Oblige me, sir, by holding one side of my travelling-bag,’ she resumed, ‘while I open it and take something out.’

The interior of the bag disclosed a series of neatly-folded papers, all laid together in order, and numbered outside. Mrs. Lecount took out one of the papers, and shut up the bag again with a loud snap of the spring that closed it.

‘At Aldborough, Mr. Noel, I had only my own opinion to support me,’ she remarked. ‘My own opinion was nothing against Miss Bygrave’s youth and beauty, and Mr. Bygrave’s ready wit. I could only hope to attack your infatuation with proofs—and at that time I had not got them. I have got them now! I am armed at all points with proofs—I bristle from head to foot with proofs—I break my forced silence, and speak with the emphasis of my proofs. Do you know this writing, sir?’

He shrank back from the paper which she offered to him.

‘I don’t understand this,’ he said nervously. ‘I don’t know what you want, or what you mean.’

Mrs. Lecount forced the paper into his hand. ‘You shall know what I mean, sir, if you will give me a moment’s attention,’ she said. ‘On the day after you went away to St. Crux, I obtained admission to Mr. Bygrave’s house, and I had some talk in private with Mr. Bygrave’s wife. That talk supplied me with the means to convince you which I had wanted to find for weeks and weeks past. I wrote you a letter to say so—I wrote to tell you, that I would forfeit my place in your service, and my expectations from your generosity, if I did not prove to you when I came back from Switzerland, that my own private suspicion of Miss Bygrave was the truth. I directed that letter to you at St. Crux, and I posted it myself. Now, Mr. Noel, read the paper which I have forced into your hand. It is Admiral Bartram’s written affirmation, that my letter came to St. Crux, and that he enclosed it to you, under cover to Mr. Bygrave, at your own request. Did Mr. Bygrave ever give you that letter? Don’t agitate yourself, sir! One word of reply will do—Yes? or No?’

He read the paper, and looked up at her with growing bewilderment and fear. She obstinately waited until he spoke. ‘No,’ he said faintly; ‘I never got the letter.’

‘First proof!’ said Mrs. Lecount, taking the paper from him, and putting it back in the bag. 'One more, with your kind permission, before we come to things more serious still. I gave you a written description, sir, at Aldborough, of a person not named; and I asked you to compare it with Miss Bygrave, the next time you were in her company. After having first shown the description to Mr. Bygrave—it is useless to deny it now, Mr. Noel; your friend at North Shingles is not here to help you!—after having first shown my note to Mr. Bygrave, you made the comparison; and you found it fail in the most important particular. There were two little moles placed close together on the left side of the neck, in my description of the unknown lady, and there were no litde moles

at all when you looked at Miss Bygrave's neck. I am old enough to be your mother, Mr. Noel. If the question is not indelicate—may I ask what the present state of your knowledge is, on the subject of your wife's neck?'

She looked at him with a merciless steadiness. He drew back a few steps, cowering under her eye. 'I can't say,' he stammered. 'I don't know. What do you mean by these questions? I never thought about the moles afterwards; I never looked. She wears her hair low———'

'She has excellent reasons to wear it low, sir,' remarked Mrs. Lecount. 'We will try and lift that hair, before we have done with the subject. When I came out here to find you in the garden, I saw a neat young person, through the kitchen window, with her work in her hand, who looked to my eyes, like a lady's maid. Is this young person your wife's maid? I beg your pardon, sir, did you say yes? In that case, another question, if you please. Did you engage her, or did your wife?'

'I engaged her———'

'While I was away? While I was in total ignorance that you meant to have a wife, or a wife's maid?'

'Yes.'

'Under those circumstances, Mr. Noel, you cannot possibly suspect me of conspiring to deceive you, with the maid for my instrument. Go into the house, sir, while I wait here. Ask the woman who dresses Mrs. Noel Vanstone's hair, morning and night, whether her mistress has a mark on the left side of her neck, and (if so) what that mark is?'

He walked a few steps towards the house, without uttering a word, then stopped, and looked back at Mrs. Lecount. His blinking eyes were steady, and his wizen face had become suddenly composed. Mrs. Lecount advanced a litde and joined him. She saw the change; but, with all her experience of him, she failed to interpret the true meaning of it.

'Are you in want of a pretence, sir?' she asked. 'Are you at a loss to account to your wife's maid for such a question as I wish you to put to her? Pretences are easily found, which will do for persons in her station of life. Say I have come here, with news of a legacy for Mrs. Noel Vanstone, and that there is a question of her identity to settle, before she can receive the money.'

She pointed to the house. He paid no attention to the sign. His face grew paler and paler. Without moving or spe along, he stood and looked at her.

'Are you afraid?' asked Mrs. Lecount.

Those words roused him; those words lit a spark of the fire of manhood in him at last. He turned on her, like a sheep on a dog.

'I won't be questioned and ordered!' he broke out, trembling violently under the new sensation of his own courage. 'I won't be threatened and mystified any longer! How did you find me out at this place? What do you mean by coming here with your hints and your mysteries? What have you got to say against my wife?'

Mrs. Lecount composedly opened the travelling-bag, and took out her smelling-bottle, in case of emergency.

'You have spoken to me in plain words,' she said. 'In plain words, sir, you shall have your answer. Are you too angry to listen?'

Her looks and tones alarmed him, in spite of himself. His courage began to sink again; and, desperately as he

tried to steady it, his voice trembled when he answered her.

‘Give me my answer,’ he said, ‘and give it at once.’

‘Your commands shall be obeyed, sir, to the letter,’ replied Mrs. Lecount. ‘I have come here with two objects. To open your eyes to your own situation; and to save your fortune—perhaps your life. Your situation is this. Miss Bygrave has married you, under a false character and a false name. Can you rouse your memory? Can you call to mind the disguised woman who threatened you in Vauxhall Walk? That woman—as certainly as I stand here—is now your wife.’

He looked at her in breathless silence, his lips falling apart; his eyes fixed in vacant inquiry. The suddenness of the disclosure had over-reached its own end. It had stupefied him.

‘My wife?’ he repeated—and burst into an imbecile laugh.

‘Your wife,’ reiterated Mrs. Lecount.

At the repetition of those two words, the strain on his faculties relaxed. A thought dawned on him for the first time. His eyes fixed on her with a furtive alarm, and he drew back hastily. ‘Mad!’ he said to himself, with a sudden remembrance of what his friend Mr. Bygrave had told him at Aldborough; sharpened by his own sense of the haggard change that he saw in her face.

He spoke in a whisper—but Mrs. Lecount heard him. She was close at his side again, in an instant. For the first time, her self-possession failed her; and she caught him angrily by the arm:

‘Will you put my madness to the proof, sir?’ she asked.

He shook off her hold; he began to gather courage again, in the intense sincerity of his disbelief—courage to face the assertion which she persisted in forcing on him.

‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘What must I do?’

‘Do what I told you,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘Ask the maid that question about her mistress, on the spot And, if she tells you the mark is there, do one thing more. Take me up into your wife’s room, and open her wardrobe in my presence, with your own hands.’

‘What do you want with her wardrobe?’ he asked.

‘You shall know when you open it.’

‘Very strange!’ he said to himself, vacantly. ‘It’s like a scene in a novel—it’s like nothing in real life.’

He went slowly into the house; and Mrs. Lecount waited for him in the garden.

After an absence of a few minutes only, he appeared again, on the top of the flight of steps which led into the garden from the house. He held by the iron rail, with one hand; while with the other he beckoned to Mrs. Lecount to join him on the steps.

‘What does the maid say?’ she asked as she approached him. ‘Is the mark there?’

He answered in a whisper, ‘Yes.’ What he had heard from the maid had produced a marked change in him. The horror of the coming discovery had laid its paralyzing hold on his mind. He moved mechanically; he looked and spoke like a man in a dream.

‘Will you take my arm, sir?’

He shook his head; and, preceding her along the passage and up the stairs, led the way into his wife’s room. When she joined him, and locked the door, he stood passively waiting for his directions, without making any remark, without showing any external appearance of surprise. He had not removed either his hat or coat. Mrs. Lecount took them off for him. ‘Thank you,’ he said, with the docility of a well-trained child. ‘It’s like a scene in a novel—it’s like nothing in real life.’

The bed-chamber was not very large, and the furniture was heavy and old fashioned. But evidences of Magdalen’s natural taste and refinement were visible everywhere, in the litde embellishments that graced and enlivened the aspect of the room. The perfume of dried rose-leaves hung fragrant on the cool air. Mrs. Lecount sniffed the perfume with a disparaging frown, and threw the window up to its full height. ‘Pah!’ she said, with a shudder of virtuous disgust—‘the atmosphere of deceit!’

She seated herself near the window. The wardrobe stood against the wall opposite, and the bed was at the side of the room on her right hand. ‘Open the wardrobe, Mr. Noel,’ she said. ‘I don’t go near it. I touch nothing in it, myself. Take out the dresses with your own hand, and put them on the bed. Take them out one by one, until I tell you to stop.’

He obeyed her. ‘I’ll do it as well as I can,’ he said. ‘My hands are cold, and my head feels half asleep.’

The dresses to be removed were not many—for Magdalen had taken some of them away with her. After he had put two dresses on the bed, he was obliged to search in the inner recesses of the wardrobe, before he could find a third. When he produced it, Mrs. Lecount made a sign to him to stop. The end was reached already: he had found the brown alpaca dress.

‘Lay it out on the bed, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘You will see a double flounce running round the bottom of it. Lift up the outer flounce, and pass the inner one through your fingers, inch by inch. If you come to a place where there is a morsel of the stuff missing, stop, and look up at me.’

He passed the flounce slowly through his fingers, for a minute or more—then stopped and looked up. Mrs. Lecount produced her pocket-book, and opened it.

‘Every word I now speak, sir, is of serious consequence to you and to me,’ she said. ‘Listen with your closest attention. When the woman calling herself Miss Garth came to see us in Vauxhall Walk, I knelt down behind the chair in which she was sitting, and I cut a morsel of stuff from the dress she wore, which might help me to know that dress, if I ever saw it again. I did this, while the woman’s whole attention was absorbed in talking to you. The morsel of stuff has been kept in my pocket-book, from that time to this. See for yourself, Mr. Noel, if it fits the gap in that dress, which your own hands have just taken from your wife’s wardrobe.’

She rose, and handed him the fragment of stuff across the bed. He put it into the vacant space in the flounce, as well as his trembling fingers would let him.

‘Does it fit, sir?’ asked Mrs. Lecount.

The dress dropped from his hands; and the deadly bluish pallor—which every doctor who attended him had warned his housekeeper to dread—overspread his face slowly. Mrs. Lecount had not reckoned on such an answer to her question as she now saw in his cheeks. She hurried round to him, with the smelling-bottle in her hand. He dropped to his knees, and caught at her dress with the grasp of a drowning man. ‘Save me!’ he gasped, in a hoarse, breathless whisper. ‘Oh, Lecount, save me!’

‘I promise to save you,’ said Mrs. Lecount; ‘I am here with the means and the resolution to save you. Come away from this place—come nearer to the air.’ She raised him as she spoke, and led him across the room to the window. ‘Do you feel the chill pain again on your left side?’ she asked, with the first signs of alarm that she had shown yet. ‘Has your wife got any eau-de-cologne, any sal-volatile in her room. Don’t exhaust yourself by speaking—point to the place!’

He pointed to a little triangular cupboard, of old worm-eaten walnut-wood, fixed high in a corner of the room. Mrs. Lecount tried the door—it was locked.

As she made that discovery, she saw his head sink back gradually on the easy-chair in which she had placed him. The warning of the doctors in past years—‘If you ever let him faint, you let him die’—recurred to her memory, as if it had been spoken the day before. She looked at the cupboard again. In a recess under it, lay some ends of cord, placed there apparently for purposes of packing. Without an instant’s hesitation, she snatched up a morsel of cord; tied one end fast round the knob of the cupboard door; and seizing the other end in both hands, pulled it suddenly with the exertion of her whole strength. The rotten wood gave way; the cupboard-doors flew open; and a heap of litde trifles poured out noisily on the floor. Without stopping to notice the broken china and glass at her feet, she looked into the dark recesses of the cupboard, and saw the gleam of two glass bottles. One was put away at the extreme back of the shelf; the other was a little in advance, almost hiding it. She snatched them both out at once, and took them, one in each hand, to the window, where she could read their labels in the clearer light.

The bottle in her right hand was the first bottle she looked at. It was marked—*Sal-volatile*.

She instantly laid the other botde aside on the table without looking at it. The other botde lay there, waiting its turn. It held a dark liquid, and it was labelled—Poison.

Chapter II

Mrs. Lecount mixed the sal-volatile with water, and administered it immediately. The stimulant had its effect. In a few minutes, Noel Vanstone was able to raise himself in the chair without assistance: his colour changed again for the better, and his breath came and went more freely.

‘How do you feel now, sir?’ asked Mrs. Lecount. ‘Are you warm again, on your left side?’

He paid no attention to that inquiry: his eyes, wandering about the room, turned by chance, towards the table. To Mrs. Lecount’s surprise, instead of answering her, he bent forward in his chair, and looked with staring eyes and pointing hand at the second bottle which she had taken from the cupboard, and which she had hastily laid aside, without paying attention to it. Seeing that some new alarm possessed him, she advanced to the table, and looked where he looked. The labelled side of the bottle was full in view; and there, in the plain handwriting of the chemist at Aldborough, was the one startling word, confronting them both—‘Poison.’

Even Mrs. Lecount’s self-possession was shaken by that discovery. She was not prepared to see her own darkest forebodings—the unacknowledged offspring of her hatred for Magdalen—realized as she saw them realized now. The suicide-despair in which the poison had been procured; the suicide-purpose for which, in distrust of the future, the poison had been kept, had brought with them their own retribution. There the bottle lay, in Magdalen’s absence, a false witness of treason which had never entered her mind—treason against her

husband's life!

With his hand still mechanically pointing at the table, Noel Vanstone raised his head, and looked up at Mrs. Lecount.

'I took it from the cupboard,' she said, answering the look. 'I took both bottles out together, not knowing which might be the bottle I wanted. I am as much shocked, as much frightened, as you are.'

'Poison!' he said to himself, slowly. 'Poison locked up by my wife, in the cupboard in her own room.' He stopped, and looked at Mrs. Lecount once more. 'For *me*? he asked, in a vacant, inquiring tone.

'We will not talk of it, sir, until your mind is more at ease,' said Mrs. Lecount. 'Iii the mean time, the danger that lies waiting in this bottle, shall be instantly destroyed in your presence.' She took out the cork, and threw the laudanum out of window, and the empty botde after it. 'Let us try to forget this dreadful discovery for the present,' she resumed; 'let us go down-stairs at once. All that I have now to say to you, can be said in another room.'

She helped him to rise from the chair, and took his arm in her own. 'It is weft for him; it is well for me,' she thought, as they went downstairs together, 'that I came when I did.'

On crossing the passage, she stepped to the front door, where the carriage was waiting which had brought her from Dumfries, and instructed the coachman to put up his horses at the nearest inn, and to call again for her in two hours' time. This done, she accompanied Noel Vanstone into the sitting-room, stirred up the fire, and placed him before it comfortably in an easy-chair. He sat for a few minutes, warming his hands feebly like an old man, and staring straight into the flame. Then he spoke.

'When the woman came and threatened me in Vauxhall Walk,' he began, still staring into the fire, 'you came back to the parlour, after she was gone; and you told me———?' He stopped, shivered a little, and lost the thread of his recollections at that point.

'I told you, sir,' said Mrs. Lecount, 'that the woman was, in my opinion, Miss Vanstone herself. Don't start, Mr. Noel! Your wife is away, and I am here to take care of you. Say to yourself, if you feel frightened, "Lecount is here; Lecount will take care of me." The truth must be told, sir—however hard to bear the truth may be. Miss Magdalen Vanstone was the woman who came to you in disguise; and the woman who came to you in disguise, is the woman you have married. The conspiracy which she threatened you with in London, is the conspiracy which has made her your wife. That is the plain truth. You have seen the dress up-stairs. If that dress had been no longer in existence, I should still have had my proofs to convince you. Thanks to my interview with Mrs. Bygrave, I have discovered the house your wife lodged at in London—it was opposite our house in Vauxhall Walk. I have laid my hand on one of the landlady's daughters, who watched your wife from an inner room, and saw her put on the disguise; who can speak to her identity, and to the identity of her companion, Mrs. Bygrave; and who has furnished me, at my own request, with a written statement of facts, which she is ready to affirm on oath, if any person ventures to contradict her. You shall read the statement, Mr. Noel, if you like, when you are fitter to understand it. You shall also read a letter in the handwriting of Miss Garth—who will repeat to you personally every word she has written to me—a letter formally denying that she was ever in Vauxhall Walk, and formally asserting that those moles on your wife's neck, are marks peculiar to Miss Magdalen Vanstone, whom she has known from childhood. I say it with a just pride—you will find no weak place anywhere in the evidence which I bring you. If Mr. Bygrave had not stolen my letter, you would have had your warning, before I was cruelly deceived into going to Zurich; and the proofs which I now bring you, after your marriage, I should then have offered to you before it. Don't hold me responsible, sir, for what has happened since I left England. Blame

your uncle's bastard daughter, and blame that villain with the brown eye and the green!'

She spoke her last venomous words as slowly and distinctly as she had spoken all the rest. Noel Vanstone made no answer—he still sat cowering over the fire. She looked round into his face. He was crying silently. 'I was so fond of her!' said the miserable little creature; 'and I thought she was so fond of Me!'

Mrs. Lecount turned her back on him in disdainful silence. 'Fond of her!' As she repeated those words to herself, her haggard face became almost handsome again in the magnificent intensity of its contempt.

She walked to a book-case at the lower end of the room, and began examining the volumes in it. Before she had been long engaged in this way, she was startled by the sound of his voice, affrightedly calling her back. The tears were gone from his face: it was blank again with terror when he now turned it towards her.

'Lecount!' he said, holding to her with both hands. 'Can an egg be poisoned? I had an egg for breakfast this morning—and a little toast.'

'Make your mind, easy, sir,' said Mrs. Lecount. 'The poison of your wife's deceit is the only poison you have taken yet. If she had resolved already on making you pay the price of your folly with your life, she would not be absent from the house while you were left living in it. Dismiss the thought from your mind. It is the middle of the day; you want refreshment. I have more to say to you, in the interests of your own safety—I have something for you to do, which must be done at once. Recruit your strength, and you will do it. I will set you the example of eating, if you still distrust the food in this house. Are you composed enough to give the servant her orders, if I ring the bell? It is necessary to the object I have in view for you, that nobody should think you ill in body, or troubled in mind. Try first with me before the servant comes in. Let us see how you look and speak when you say, "Bring up the lunch." '

After two rehearsals, Mrs. Lecount considered him fit to give the order, without betraying himself.

The bell was answered by Louisa—Louisa looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. The luncheon was brought up by the housemaid—the housemaid looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. When luncheon was over, the table was cleared by the cook—the cook looked hard at Mrs. Lecount. The three servants were plainly suspicious that something extraordinary was going on in the house. It was hardly possible to doubt that they had arranged to share among themselves the three opportunities which the service of the table afforded them of entering the room.

The curiosity of which she was the object did not escape the penetration of Mrs. Lecount. 'I did well,' she thought, 'to arm myself in good time with the means of reaching my end. If I let the grass grow under my feet, one or other of those women might get in my way.' Roused by this consideration, she produced her travelling-bag from a corner, as soon as the last of the servants had left the room;* and seating herself at the end of the table opposite Noel Vanstone, looked at him for a moment, with a steady investigating attention. She had carefully regulated the quantity of wine which he had taken at luncheon—she had let him drink exactly enough to fortify, without confusing him—and she now examined his face critically, like an artist examining his picture, at the end of the day's work. The result appeared to satisfy her; and she opened the serious business of the interview on the spot.

'Will you look at the written evidence I have mentioned to you, Mr. Noel, before I say any more?' she inquired. 'Or are you sufficiently persuaded of the truth to proceed at once to the suggestion which I have now to make to you?'

'Let me hear your suggestion,' he said, sullenly resting his elbows on the table, and leaning his head on his hands.

Mrs. Lecount took from her travelling-bag the written evidence to which she had just alluded, and carefully placed the papers on one side of him, within easy reach, if he wished to refer to them. Far from being daunted, she was visibly encouraged by the ungraciousness of his manner. Her experience of him informed her that the sign was a promising one. On those rare occasions when the little resolution that he possessed was roused in him, it invariably asserted itself—like the resolution of most other weak men—aggressively. At such times, in proportion as he was outwardly sullen and discourteous to those about him, his resolution rose; and in proportion as he was considerate and polite, it fell. The tone of the answer he had just given, and the attitude he assumed at the table, convinced Mrs. Lecount that Spanish wine and Scotch mutton had done their duty, and had rallied his sinking courage.

'I will put the question to you for form's sake, sir, if you wish it,' she proceeded. 'But I am already certain, without any question at all, that you have made your will?'

He nodded his head without looking at her.

'You have made it in your wife's favour?'

He nodded again.

'You have left her everything you possess?'

'No.'

Mrs. Lecount looked surprised.

'Did you exercise a reserve towards her, Mr. Noel, of your own accord?' she inquired, 'or is it possible that your wife put her own limits to her interest in your will?'

He was uneasily silent—he was plainly ashamed to answer the question. Mrs. Lecount repeated it in a less direct form.

'How much have you left your widow, Mr. Noel, in the event of your death?'

'Eighty thousand pounds.'

That reply answered the question. Eighty thousand pounds was exactly the fortune which Michael Vanstone had taken from his brother's orphan children, at his brother's death—exactly the fortune of which Michael Vanstone's son had kept possession, in his turn, as pitilessly as his father before him. Noel Vanstone's silence was eloquent of the confession which he was ashamed to make. His doting weakness had, beyond all doubt, placed his whole property at the feet of his wife. And this girl, whose vindictive daring had defied all restraints —this girl, who had not shrunk from her desperate determination even at the church-door—had, in the very hour of her triumph, taken part only from the man who would willingly have given all!—had rigorously exacted her father's fortune from him to the last farthing; and had then turned her back on the hand that was tempting her with tens of thousands more! For the moment, Mrs. Lecount was fairly silenced by her own surprise; Magdalen had forced the astonishment from her which is akin to admiration, the astonishment which her enmity would fain have refused. She hated Magdalen with a tenfold hatred from that time.

'I have no doubt, sir,' she resumed, after a momentary silence, 'that Mrs. Noel gave you excellent reasons why the provision for her at your death should be no more, and no less, than eighty thousand pounds. And, on the other hand, I am equally sure that you, in your innocence of all suspicion, found those reasons conclusive at the time. That time has now gone by. Your eyes are opened, sir—and you will not fail to remark (as I remark) that

the Combe-Raven property happens to reach the same sum exactly, as the legacy which your wife's own instructions directed you to leave her. If you are still in any doubt of the motive for which she married you, look in your own will—and there the motive is!'

He raised his head from his hands, and became closely attentive to what she was saying to him, for the first time since they had faced each other at the table. The Combe-Raven property had never been classed by itself in his estimation. It had come to him merged in his father's other possessions, at his father's death. The discovery which had now opened before him, was one to which his ordinary habits of thought, as well as his innocence of suspicion, had hitherto closed his eyes. He said nothing; but he looked less sullenly at Mrs. Lecount. His manner was more ingratiating; the high tide of his courage was already on the ebb.

'Your position, sir, must be as plain by this time to you as it is to me,' said Mrs. Lecount. 'There is only one obstacle now left, between this woman and the attainment of her end. *That obstacle is your life*. After the discovery we have made up-stairs, I leave you to consider for yourself what your life is worth.'

At those terrible words, the ebbing resolution in him ran out to the last drop. 'Don't frighten me!' he pleaded; 'I have been frightened enough already.' He rose, and dragged his chair after him round the table to Mrs. Lecount's side. He sat down and caressingly kissed her hand. 'You good creature!' he said, in a sinking voice. 'You excellent Lecount! Tell me what to do. I'm full of resolution—I'll do anything to save my life!'

'Have you got writing materials in the room, sir?' asked Mrs. Lecount. 'Will you put them on the table, if you please?'

While the writing materials were in process of collection, Mrs. Lecount made a new demand on the resources of her travelling-bag. She took two papers from it, each endorsed in the same neat commercial handwriting. One was described as 'Draft for proposed Will;' and the other, as 'Draft for proposed Letter.' When she placed them before her on the table, her hand shook a little; and she applied the smelling-salts, which she had brought with her in Noel Vanstone's interests, to her own nostrils.

'I had hoped, when I came here, Mr. Noel,' she proceeded, 'to have given you more time for consideration, than it seems safe to give you now. When you first told me of your wife's absence in London, I thought it probable that the object of her journey was to see her sister and Miss Garth. Since the horrible discovery we have made up-stairs, I am inclined to alter that opinion. Your wife's determination not to tell you who the friends are whom she has gone to see, fills me with alarm. She may have accomplices in London—accomplices, for anything we know to the contrary, in this house. All three of your servants, sir, have taken the opportunity in turn of coming into the room, and looking at me. I don't like their looks! Neither you nor I know what may happen from day to day—or even from hour to hour. If you take my advice, you will get the start at once of all possible accidents; and when the carriage comes back, you will leave this house with me!'

'Yes, yes!' he said eagerly; 'I'll leave the house with you. I wouldn't stop here by myself for any sum of money that could be offered me. What do we want the pen and ink for? Are you to write, or am I?'

'You are to write, sir,' said Mrs. Lecount. 'The means taken for promoting your own safety are to be means set in motion, from beginning to end, by yourself. I suggest, Mr. Noel—and you decide. Recognise your own position, sir. What is your first and foremost necessity? It is plainly this. You must destroy your wife's interest in your death, by making another will.'

He vehemently nodded his approval; his colour rose and his blinking eyes brightened in malicious triumph. 'She sha'n't have a farthing,' he said to himself, in a whisper—'she sha'n't have a farthing!'

‘When your will is made, sir,’ proceeded Mrs. Lecount, ‘you must place it in the hands of a trustworthy person—not my hands, Mr. Noel; I am only your servant! Then, when the will is safe, and when you are safe, write to your wife at this house. Tell her, her infamous imposture is discovered—tell her you have made a new will, which leaves her penniless at your death—tell her, in your righteous indignation, that she enters your doors no more. Place yourself in that strong position, and it is no longer you who are at your wife’s mercy, but your wife who is at yours. Assert your own power, sir, with the law to help you—and crush this woman into submission to any terms for the future that you please to impose.’

He eagerly took up the pen. ‘Yes,’ he said, with a vindictive self-importance, ‘any terms I please to impose.’ He suddenly checked himself, and his face became dejected and perplexed. ‘How can I do it now?’ he asked, throwing down the pen as quickly as he had taken it up.

‘Do what, sir?’ inquired Mrs. Lecount.

‘How can I make my will, with Mr. Loscombe away in London, and no lawyer here to help me?’

Mrs. Lecount gently tapped the papers before her on the table with her forefinger.

‘All the help you need, sir, is waiting for you here,’ she said. ‘I considered this matter carefully, before I came to you; and I provided myself with the confidential assistance of a friend, to guide me through those difficulties which I could not penetrate for myself. The friend to whom I refer, is a gentleman of Swiss extraction, but born and bred in England. He is not a lawyer by profession—but he has had his own sufficient experience of the law, nevertheless; and he has supplied me, not only with a model by which you may make your will, but with the written sketch of a letter which it is as important for us to have, as the model of the will itself. There is another necessity waiting for you, Mr. Noel, which I have not mentioned yet—but which is no less urgent in its way, then the necessity of the will.’

‘What is it?’ he asked, with roused curiosity.

‘We will take it in its turn, sir,’ answered Mrs. Lecount. ‘Its turn has not come yet. The will, if you please, first. I will dictate from the model in my possession—and you will write.’

Noel Vanstone looked at the draft for the Will and the draft for the Letter, with suspicious curiosity.

‘I think I ought to see the papers myself, before you dictate,’ he said. ‘It would be more satisfactory to my own mind, Lecount.’

‘By all means, sir,’ rejoined Mrs. Lecount, handing him the papers immediately.

He read the draft for the Will first, pausing and knitting his brows distrustfully, wherever he found blank spaces left in the manuscript, to be filled in with the names of persons, and the enumeration of sums bequeathed to them. Two or three minutes of reading brought him to the end of the paper. He gave it back to Mrs. Lecount without making any objection to it.

The draft for the Letter was a much longer document. He obstinately read it through to the end, with an expression of perplexity and discontent which showed that it was utterly unintelligible to him. ‘I must have this explained,’ he said, with a touch of his old self-importance, ‘before I take any steps in the matter.’

‘It shall be explained, sir, as we go on,’ said Mrs. Lecount.

‘Every word of it?’

‘Every word of it, Mr. Noel, when its turn comes. You have no objection to the will? To the will, then, as I said before, let us devote ourselves first. You have seen for yourself that it is short enough and simple enough for a child to understand it. But if any doubts remain on your mind, by all means compose those doubts by showing your will to a lawyer by profession. In the mean time, let me not be considered intrusive, if I remind you that we are all mortal, and that the lost opportunity can never be recalled. While your time is your own, sir, and while your enemies are unsuspicious of you, make your will!’

She opened a sheet of note-paper, and smoothed it out before him; she dipped the pen in ink, and placed it in his hands. He took it from her without speaking—he was, to all appearance, suffering under some temporary uneasiness of mind. But the main point was gained. There he sat, with the paper before him, and the pen in his hand; ready at last, in right earnest, to make his will.

‘The first question for you to decide, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount, after a preliminary glance at her Draft, ‘is your choice of an executor. I have no desire to influence your decision; but I may, without impropriety, remind you that a wise choice means, in other words, the choice of an old and tried friend whom you know that you can trust.’

‘It means the admiral, I suppose?’ said Noel Vanstone.

Mrs. Lecount bowed.

‘Very well,’ he continued. ‘The admiral let it be.’

There was plainly some oppression still weighing on his mind. Even under the trying circumstances in which he was placed, it was not in his nature to take Mrs. Lecount’s perfectly sensible and disinterested advice without a word of cavil, as he had taken it now.

‘Are you ready, sir?’

‘Yes.’

Mrs. Lecount dictated the first paragraph, from the Draft, as follows:—

‘This is the last Will and Testament of me, Noel Vanstone, now living at Baliol Cottage, near Dumfries. I revoke, absolutely and in every particular, my former will executed on the thirtieth of September, eighteen hundred and forty-seven; and I hereby appoint Rear-Admiral Arthur Everard Bartram, of St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex, sole executor of this my will.’

‘Have you written those words, sir?’

‘Yes.’

Mrs. Lecount laid down the Draft; Noel Vanstone laid down the pen. They neither of them looked at each other. There was a long silence.

‘I am waiting, Mr. Noel,’ said Mrs. Lecount, at last, ‘to hear what your wishes are, in respect to the disposal of your fortune. Your *large* fortune,’ she added, with merciless emphasis.

He took up the pen again, and began picking the feathers from the quill in dead silence.

‘Perhaps, your existing will may help you to instruct me, sir,’ pursued Mrs. Lecount. ‘May I inquire to whom you left all your surplus money, after leaving the eighty thousand pounds to your wife?’

If he had answered that question plainly, he must have said, ‘I have left the whole surplus to my cousin, George Bartram’—and the implied acknowledgment that Mrs. Lecount’s name was not mentioned in the will, must then have followed in Mrs. Lecount’s presence. A much bolder man, in his situation, might have felt the same oppression and the same embarrassment which he was feeling now. He picked the last morsel of feather from the quill; and, desperately leaping the pitfall under his feet, advanced to meet Mrs. Lecount’s claims on him of his own accord.

‘I would rather not talk of any will, but the will I am making now,’ he said uneasily. ‘The first thing, Lecount ———’ He hesitated—put the bare end of the quill into his mouth—gnawed at it thoughtfully—and stud no more.

‘Yes, sir?’ persisted Mrs. Lecount.

‘The first thing is———’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘The first thing is, to—to make some provision for You?’

He spoke the last words in a tone of plaintive interrogation—as if all hope of being met by a magnanimous refusal had not deserted him, even yet. Mrs. Lecount enlightened his mind on this point, without a moment’s loss of time.

‘Thank you, Mr. Noel,’ she said, with the tone and manner of a woman who was not acknowledging a favour, but receiving a right.

He took another bite at the quill. The perspiration began to appear on his face.

‘The difficulty is,’ he remarked, ‘to say how much.’

‘Your lamented father, sir,’ rejoined Mrs. Lecount, ‘met that difficulty (if you remember) at the time of his last illness?’

‘I don’t remember,’ said Noel Vanstone, doggedly.

‘You were on one side of his bed, sir; and I was on the other. We were vainly trying to persuade him to make his will. After telling us he would wait, and make his will when he was well again—he looked round at me, and said some kind and feeling words which my memory will treasure to my dying day. Have you forgotten those words, Mr. Noel?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Noel, without hesitation.

‘In my present situation, sir,’ retorted Mrs. Lecount, ‘delicacy forbids me to improve your memory.’

She looked at her watch, and relapsed into silence. He clenched his hands, and writhed from side to side of his chair, in an agony of indecision. Mrs. Lecount passively refused to take the slightest notice of him.

‘What should you say—?’ he began, and suddenly stopped again.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘What should you say to—a thousand pounds?’

Mrs. Lecount rose from her chair, and looked him full in the face, with the majestic indignation of an outraged woman.

‘After the service I have rendered you to-day, Mr. Noel,’ she said, ‘I have at least earned a claim on your respect —if I have earned nothing more. I wish you good morning.’

‘Two thousand!’ cried Noel Vanstone, with the courage of despair.

Mrs. Lecount folded up her papers, and hung her travelling-bag over her arm in contemptuous silence.

‘Three thousand!’

Mrs. Lecount moved with impenetrable dignity from the table to the door.

‘Four thousand!’

Mrs. Lecount gathered her shawl round her with a shudder, and opened the door.

‘Five thousand!’

He clasped his hands, and wrung them at her in a frenzy of rage and suspense. ‘Five thousand,’ was the death-cry of his pecuniary suicide.

Mrs. Lecount softly shut the door again, and came back a step.

‘Free of legacy duty, sir?’ she inquired.

‘No!’

Mrs. Lecount turned on her heel, and opened the door again.

‘Yes!’

Mrs. Lecount came back, and resumed her place at the table, as if nothing had happened.

‘Five thousand pounds, free of legacy duty, was the sum, sir, which your father’s grateful regard promised me in his will,’ she said, quiedy. ‘If you choose to exert your memory, as you have not chosen to exert it yet, your memory will tell you that I speak the truth. I accept your filial performance of your father’s promise, Mr. Noel —and there I stop. I scorn to take a mean advantage of my posidon towards you; I scorn to grasp anything from your fears. You are protected by my respect for myself, and for the Illustrious Name I bear. You are welcome to all that I have done, and to all that I have suffered in your service. The widow of Professor Lecompte, sir, takes what is justly hers—and takes no more!’

As she spoke those words, the traces of sickness seemed, for. the moment, to disappear from her face; her eyes shone with a steady inner light; all the woman warmed and brightened in the radiance of her own triumph—the triumph, trebly won, of carrying her point, of vindicating her integrity, and of matching Magdalen’s incorruptible self-denial on Magdalen’s own ground.

‘When you are yourself again, sir, we will proceed. Let us wait a little first.’

She gave him time to compose himself; and then, after first looking at her Draft, dictated the second paragraph of the will, in these terms:

‘I give and bequeath to Madame Virginie Lecompte (widow of Professor Lecompte, late of Zurich) the sum of Five Thousand Pounds, free of Legacy Duty. And, in making this bequest, I wish to place it on record that I am not only expressing my own sense of Madame Lecompte’s attachment and fidelity in the capacity of my housekeeper, but that I also believe myself to be executing the intentions of my deceased father, who, but for the circumstance of his dying intestate, would have left Madame Lecompte, in *his* will, the same token of grateful regard for her services, which I now leave her in mine.’

‘Have you written the last words, sir?’

‘Yes.’

Mrs. Lecount leaned across the table, and offered Noel Vanstone her hand.

‘Thank you, Mr. Noel,’ she said. ‘The five thousand pounds is the acknowledgment on your father’s side of what I have done for him. The words in the will are the acknowledgment on yours.’

A faint smile flickered over his face for the first time. It comforted him, on reflection, to think that matters might have been worse. There was balm for his wounded spirit, in paying the debt of gratitude by a sentence not negotiable at his banker’s. Whatever his father might have done—*he* had got Lecount a bargain, after all!

‘A little more writing, sir,’ resumed Mrs. Lecount, ‘and your painful, but necessary, duty will be performed. The trifling matter of my legacy being settled, we may come to the important question that is left. The future direction of a large fortune is now waiting your word of command. To whom is it to go?’

He began to writhe again in his chair. Even under the all-powerful fascination of his wife, the parting with his money on paper had not been accomplished without a pang. He had endured the pang; he had resigned himself to the sacrifice. And now, here was the dreaded ordeal again, awaiting him mercilessly for the second time!

‘Perhaps it may assist your decision, sir, if I repeat a question which I have put to you already,’ observed Mrs. Lecount. ‘In the will that you made under your wife’s influence, to whom did you leave the surplus money which remained at your own disposal?’

There was no harm in answering the question, now. He acknowledged that he had left the money to his cousin George.

‘You could have done nothing better, Mr. Noel—and you can do nothing better now,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘Mr. George and his two sisters are your only relations left. One of those sisters is an incurable invalid, with more than money enough already for all the wants which her affliction allows her to feel. The other is the wife of a man, even richer than yourself. To leave the money to these sisters is to waste it. To leave the money to their brother George, is to give your cousin exactly the assistance which he will want, when he one day inherits his uncle’s dilapidated house, and his uncle’s impoverished estate. A will which names the admiral your executor, and Mr. George your heir, is the right will for you to make. It does honour to the claims of friendship, and it does justice to the claims of blood.’

She spoke warmly—for she spoke with a grateful remembrance of all that she herself owed to the hospitality of St. Crux. Noel Vanstone took up another pen, and began to strip the second quill of its feathers as he had stripped the first.

‘Yes,’ he said, reluctantly; ‘I suppose George must have it—I suppose George has the principal claim on me.’ He hesitated: he looked at the door, he looked at the window, as if he longed to make his escape by one way or the other. ‘Oh, Lecount,’ he cried, piteously, ‘it’s such a large fortune! Let me wait a little, before I leave it to

anybody.'

To his surprise, Mrs. Lecount at once complied with this characteristic request.

'I wish you to wait, sir,' she replied. 'I have something important to say, before you add another line to your will. A little while since, I told you there was a second necessity connected with your present situation, which had not been provided for yet—but which must be provided for, when the time came. The time has come now. You have a serious difficulty to meet and conquer, before you can leave your fortune to your cousin George.'

'What difficulty?' he asked.

Mrs. Lecount rose from her chair, without answering—stole to the door—and suddenly threw it open. No one was listening outside; the passage was a solitude, from one end to the other.

'I distrust all servants,' she said, returning to her place—'your servants particularly. Sit closer, Mr. Noel. What I have now to say to you, must be heard by no living creature but ourselves.'

Chapter III

There was a pause of a few minutes, while Mrs. Lecount opened the second of the two papers which lay before her on the table, and refreshed her memory by looking it rapidly through. This done, she once more addressed herself to Noel Vanstone; carefully lowering her voice, so as to render it inaudible to any one who might be listening in the passage outside.

'I must beg your permission, sir,' she began, 'to return to the subject of your wife. I do so most unwillingly; and I promise you that what I have now to say about her, shall be said, for your sake and for mine, in the fewest words. What do we know of this woman, Mr. Noel—judging her by her own confession when she came to us in the character of Miss Garth, and by her own acts afterwards at Aid-borough? We know that, if death had not snatched your father out of her reach, she was ready with her plot to rob him of the Combe-Raven money. We know that when you inherited the money in your turn, she was ready with her plot to rob *you*. We know how she carried that plot through to the end; and we know that nothing but your death is wanted, at this moment, to crown her rapacity and her deception with success. We are sure of these things. We are sure that she is young, bold, and clever—that she has neither doubts, scruples, nor pity—and that she possesses the personal qualities which men in general (quite incomprehensibly to *me!)* are weak enough to admire. These are not fancies, Mr. Noel, but facts—you know them as well as I do.'

He made a sign in the affirmative, and Mrs. Lecount went oh:

'Keep in your mind what I have said of the past, sir, and now look with me to the future. I hope and trust you have a long life still before you; but let us, for the moment only, suppose the case of your death—your death leaving this will behind you, which gives your fortune to your cousin George. I am told there is an office in London, in which copies of all wills must be kept. Any curious stranger who chooses to pay a shilling for the privilege, may enter that office, and may read any will in the place, at his or her discretion. Do you see what I am coming to, Mr. Noel? Your disinherited widow pays her shilling, and reads your will. Your disinherited widow sees that the Combe-Raven money, which has gone from your father to you, goes next from you to Mr. George Bartram. What is the certain end of that discovery? The end is that you leave to your cousin and your friend, the legacy of this woman's vengeance and this woman's deceit—vengeance made more resolute, deceit

made more devilish than ever, by her exasperation at her own failure. What is your cousin George? He is a generous, unsuspicious man; incapable of deceit himself, and fearing no deception in others. Leave him at the mercy of your wife's unscrupulous fascinations and your wife's unfathomable deceit—and I see the end, as certainly as I see you sitting there! She will blind his eyes, as she blinded yours; and, in spite of*you*, in spite of *me*, she will have the money!'

She stopped; and left her last words time to gain their hold on his mind. The circumstances had been stated so clearly, the conclusion from them had been so plainly drawn, that he seized her meaning without an effort, and seized it at once.

'I see!' he said, vindictively clenching his hands. 'I understand, Lecount! She sha'n't have a farthing. What shall I do? Shall I leave the money to the admiral?' He paused, and considered a little. 'No,' he resumed; 'there's the same danger in leaving it to the admiral that there is in leaving it to George.'

'There is no danger, Mr. Noel, if you take my advice.'

'What is your advice?'

'Follow your own idea, sir. Take the pen in hand again, and leave the money to Admiral Bartram.'

He mechanically dipped the pen in the ink—and then hesitated.

'You shall know where I am leading you, sir,' said Mrs. Lecount, 'before you sign your will. In the mean time, let us gain every inch of ground we can, as we go on. I want the will to be all written out, before we advance a single step beyond it. Begin your third paragraph, Mr. Noel, under the lines which leave me my legacy of five thousand pounds.'

She dictated the last momentous sentence of the will (from the rough draft in her own possession) in these words:

'The whole residue of my estate, after payment of my burial expenses and my lawful debts, I give and bequeath to Rear-Admiral Arthur Everard Bartram, my Executor aforesaid; to be by him applied to such uses as he may think fit.

'Signed, sealed, and delivered this third day of November, eighteen hundred and forty-seven, by Noel Vanstone, the within-named testator, as and for his last Will and Testament, in the presence of us———.'

'Is that all?' asked Noel Vanstone, in astonishment.

'That is enough, sir, to bequeath your fortune to the admiral; and, therefore, that is all. Now let us go back to the case which we have supposed already. Your widow pays her shilling, and sees this will. There is the Combe-Raven money left to Admiral Bartram; with a declaration in plain words that it is his, to use as he likes. When she sees this, what does she do? She sets her trap for the admiral. He is a bachelor, and he is an old man. Who is to protect him against the arts of this desperate woman? Protect him yourself, sir, with a few more strokes of that pen which has done such wonders already. You have left him this legacy, in your will—which your wife sees. Take the legacy away again, in a letter—which is a dead secret between the admiral and you. Put the will and the letter under one cover, and place them in the admiral's possession, with your written directions to him to break the seal on the day of your death. Let the will say what it says now; and let the letter (which is your secret and his) tell him the truth. Say that in leaving him your fortune, you leave it with the request that he will take his legacy with one hand from you, and give it with the other to his nephew George. Tell him that your trust in this matter rests solely on your confidence in his honour, and on your belief in his affectionate remembrance of your

father and yourself. You have known the admiral since you were a boy. He has his little whims and oddities—but he is a gentleman from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot; and he is utterly incapable of proving false to a trust in his honour, reposed by his dead friend. Meet the difficulty boldly, by such a stratagem as this; and you save these two helpless men from your wife's snares, one by means of the other. Here, on one side, is your will, which gives the fortune to the admiral, and sets her plotting accordingly. And there, on the other side, is your letter, which privately puts the money into the nephew's hands!'

The malicious dexterity of this combination was exactly the dexterity which Noel Vanstone was most fit to appreciate. He tried to express his approval and admiration in words. Mrs. Lecount held up her hand warningly, and closed his lips.

'Wait, sir, before you express your opinion,' she went on. 'Half the difficulty is all that we have conquered yet. Let us say, the admiral has made the use of your legacy which you have privately requested him to make of it. Sooner or later, however well the secret may be kept, your wife will discover the truth. What follows that discovery? She lays siege to Mr. George. All you have done is to leave him the money by a roundabout way. There he is, after an interval of time, as much at her mercy as if you had openly mentioned him in your will. What is the remedy for this? The remedy is to mislead her, if we can, for die second time—to set up an obstacle between her and the money, for the protection of your cousin George. Can you guess for yourself, Mr. Noel, what is the most promising obstacle we can put in her way?'

He shook his head. Mrs. Lecount smiled, and startled him into close attention by laying her hand on his arm.

'Put a Woman in her way, sir!' she whispered in her wiliest tones. ' *We* don't believe in that fascinating beauty of hers—whatever *you* may do. *Our* lips don't bum to kiss those smooth cheeks. *Our* arms don't long to be round that supple waist. *We* see through her smiles and her graces, and her stays and her padding—she can't fascinate *us!* Put a woman in her way, Mr. Noel! Not a woman in my helpless situation, who is only a servant—but a woman with the authority and the jealousy of a Wife. Make it a condition, in your letter to the admiral, that if Mr. George is a bachelor at the time of your death, he shall marry within a certain time afterwards—or he shall not have the legacy. Suppose he remains single in spite of your condition—who is to have the money then? Put a woman in your wife's way, sir, once more—and leave the fortune, in that case, to the married sister of your cousin George.'

She paused. Noel Vanstone again attempted to express his opinion; and again Mrs. Lecount's hand extinguished him in silence.

'If you approve, Mr. Noel,' she said, 'I will take your approval for granted. If you object, I will meet your objection before it is out of your mouth. You may say:—Suppose this condition is sufficient to answer the purpose, why hide it in a private letter to the admiral? Why not openly write it down, with my cousin's name, in the will? Only for one reason, sir. Only because the secret way is the sure way, with such a woman as your wife. The more secret you can keep your intentions, the more time you force her to waste in finding them out for herself. That time which she loses, is time gained from her treachery by the admiral—time gained by Mr. George (if he is still a bachelor) for his undisturbed choice of a lady—time gained, for her own security, by the object of his choice, who might otherwise be the first object of your wife's suspicion and your wife's hostility. Remember the bottle we have discovered upstairs; and keep this desperate woman ignorant, and therefore harmless, as long as you can. There is my advice, Mr. Noel, in the fewest and plainest words. What do you say, sir? Am I almost as clever in my way as your friend Mr. Bygrave? Can I, too, conspire a little, when the object of my conspiracy is to assist your wishes and to protect your friends?'

Permitted the use of his tongue at last, Noel Vanstone's admiration of Mrs. Lecount expressed itself in terms

precisely similar to those which he had used on a former occasion, in paying his compliments to Captain Wragge. ‘What a head you have got!’ were the grateful words which he had once spoken to Mrs. Lecount’s bitterest enemy. ‘What a head you have got!’ were the grateful words which he now spoke again to Mrs. Lecount herself. So do extremes meet; and such is sometimes the all-embracing capacity of the approval of a fool!

‘Allow my head, sir, to deserve the compliment which you have paid to it,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘The letter to the admiral is not written yet. Your will there, is a body without a soul—an Adam without an Eve—until the letter is completed, and laid by its side. A little more dictation on my part, a little more writing on yours—and our work is done. Pardon me. The letter will be longer than the will—we must have larger paper than the note-paper this time.’

The writing-case was searched, and some letter-paper was found in it of the size required. Mrs. Lecount resumed her dictation; and Noel Vanstone resumed his pen.

‘Baliol Cottage, Dumfries,

‘November 3rd, 1847.

‘Private.

‘Dear Admiral Bartram,

‘When you open my Will (in which you are named my sole executor), you will find that I have bequeathed the whole residue of my estate—after payment of one legacy of five thousand pounds—to yourself. It is the purpose of my letter to tell you privately what the object is for which I have left you the fortune which is now placed in your hands.

‘I beg you to consider this large legacy, as intended, under certain conditions, to be given by you to your nephew George. If your nephew is married at the time of my death, and if his wife is living, I request you to put him at once in possession of your legacy; accompanying it by the expression of my desire (which I am sure he will consider a sacred and binding obligation on him) that he will setde the money on his wife—and on his children, if he has any. If, on the other hand, he is unmarried at the time of my death, or if he is a widower—in either of those cases, I make it a condition of his receiving the legacy, that he shall be married within the period of———’

Mrs. Lecount laid down the Draft letter from which she had been dictating thus far, and informed Noel Vanstone by a sign that his pen might rest.

‘We have come to the question of time, sir,’ she observed. ‘How long will you give your cousin to marry, if he is single, or a widower, at the time of your death?’

‘Shall I give him a year?’ inquired Noel Vanstone.

‘If we had nothing to consider but the interests of Propriety,’ said Mrs. Lecount, ‘I should say a year too, sir—especially if Mr. George should happen to be a widower. But we have your wife to consider, as well as the interests of Propriety. A year of delay, between your death and your cousin’s marriage, is a dangerously long time to leave the disposal of your fortune in suspense. Give a determined woman a year to plot and contrive in, and there is no saying what she may not do.’

‘Six months?’ suggested Noel Vanstone.

‘Six months, sir,’ rejoined Mrs. Lecount, ‘is the preferable time of the two. A six months’ interval from the day of your death is enough for Mr. George.—You look discomposed, sir. What is the matter?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t talk so much about my death,’ he broke out petulantly. ‘I don’t like it! I hate the very sound of the word!’

Mrs. Lecount smiled resignedly, and referred to her Draft.

‘I see the word ‘decease’ written here,’ she remarked. ‘Perhaps, Mr. Noel, you would prefer it?’

‘Yes,’ he said; ‘I prefer “Decease.” It doesn’t sound so dreadful as “Death.” ’

‘Let us go on with the letter, sir.’

She resumed her dictation as follows:

‘……in either of those cases, I make it a condition of his receiving the legacy that he shall be married within the period of Six calendar months from the day of my decease; that the woman he marries shall *not* be a widow; and that his marriage shall be a marriage by Banns, publicly celebrated in the parish church of Ossory—where he has been known from his childhood, and where the family and circumstances of his future wife are likely to be the subject of public interest and inquiry.’

‘This,’ said Mrs. Lecount, quietly looking up from the Draft, ‘is to protect Mr. George, sir, in case the same trap is set for him, which was successfully set for you. She will not find her false character and her false name fit quite so easily, next time—no, not even with Mr. Bygrave to help her! Another dip of ink, Mr. Noel; let us write the next paragraph. Are you ready?’

‘Yes.’

Mrs. Lecount went on:

‘If your nephew fails to comply with these conditions—that is to say, if, being either a bachelor or a widower at the time of my decease, he fails to marry in all respects as I have here instructed him to marry, within Six calendar months from that time—it is my desire that he shall not receive the legacy, or any part of it. I request you, in the case here supposed, to pass him over altogether; and to give the fortune left you in my will, to his married sister, Mrs. Girdlestone.

‘Having now put you in possession of my motives and intentions, I come to the next question which it is necessary to consider. If, when you open this letter, your nephew is an unmarried man, it is clearly indispensable that he should know of the conditions here imposed on him, as soon, if possible, as you know of them yourself. Are you, under these circumstances, freely to communicate to him what I have here written to you? Or, are you to leave him under the impression that no such private expression of my wishes as this is in existence; and are you to state all the conditions relating to his marriage, as if they emanated entirely from yourself?

‘If you will adopt this latter alternative, you will add one more to the many obligations under which your friendship has placed me.

‘I have serious reason to believe that the possession of my money, and the discovery of any peculiar arrangements relating to the disposal of it, will be objects (after my decease) of the fraud and conspiracy of an unscrupulous person. I am therefore anxious—for your sake, in the first place—that no suspicion of the

existence of this letter should be conveyed to the mind of the person to whom I allude. And I am equally desirous—for Mrs. Girdle-stone's sake, in the second place—that this same person should be entirely ignorant that the legacy will pass into Mrs. Girdlestone's possession, if your nephew is not married in the given time. I know George's easy, pliable disposition; I dread the attempts that will be made to practise on it; and I feel sure that the prudent course will be, to abstain from trusting him with secrets, the rash revelation of which might be followed by serious, and even dangerous results.

'State the conditions, therefore, to your nephew, as if they were your own. Let him think they have been suggested to your mind by the new responsibilities imposed on you as a man of property, by your position in my will, and by your consequent anxiety to provide for the perpetuation of the family name. If these reasons are not sufficient to satisfy him, there can be no objection to your referring him, for any further explanations which he may desire, to his wedding-day.

'I have done. My last wishes are now confided to you, in implicit reliance on your honour, and on your tender regard for the memory of your friend. Of the miserable circumstances which compel me to write as I have written here, I say nothing. You will hear of them, if my life is spared, from my own tips—for you will be the first friend whom I shall consult in my difficulty and distress. Keep this letter strictly secret, and strictly in your own possession, until my requests are complied with. Let no human being but yourself know where it is, on any pretence whatever.

'Believe me, dear Admiral Bartram, 'Affectionately yours,

'Noel Vanstone.'

'Have you signed, sir?' asked Mrs. Lecount. 'Let me look the letter over, if you please, before we seal it up.'

She read the letter carefully. In Noel Vanstone's close, cramped handwriting, it filled two pages of letter-paper, and ended at the top of the third page. Instead of using an envelope, Mrs. Lecount folded it, neatly and securely, in the old-fashioned way. She lit the taper in the inkstand, and returned the letter to the writer.

'Seal it, Mr. Noel,' she said, 'with your own hand, and your own seal.' She extinguished the taper, and handed him the pen again. 'Address the letter, sir,' she proceeded, 'to *Admiral Bartram, St. Cmx-in-the-Marsh, Essex*. Now add these words, and sign them, above the address: *To be kept in your own possession, and to be opened by yourself only, on the day of my death*—or "Decease," if you prefer it—*Noel Vanstone*. Have you done? Let me look at it again. Quite right in every particular. Accept my congratulations, sir. If your wife has not plotted her last plot for the Combe-Raven money, it is not your fault, Mr. Noel—and not mine!'

Finding his attention released by the completion of the letter, Noel Vanstone reverted at once to purely personal considerations. 'There is my packing-up to be thought of now,' he said. 'I can't go away without my warm things.'

'Excuse me, sir,' rejoined Mrs. Lecount, 'there is the Will to be signed first; and there must be two persons found to witness your signature.' She looked out of the front window, and saw the carriage waiting at the door. 'The coachman will do for one of the witnesses,' she said. 'He is in respectable service at Dumfries, and he can be found if he happens to be wanted. We must have one of your own servants, I suppose, for the other witness. They are all detestable women; but the cook is the least ill-looking of the three. Send for the cook, sir, while I go out and call the coachman. When we have got our witnesses here, you have only to speak to them in these words:—"I have a document here to sign, and I wish you to write your names on it, as witnesses of my signature." Nothing more, Mr. Noel! Say those few words, in your usual manner—and, when the signing is over, I will see myself to your packing-up, and your warm things.'

She went to the front door, and summoned the coachman to the parlour. On her return, she found the cook already in the room. The cook looked mysteriously offended, and stared without intermission at Mrs. Lecount. In a minute more, the coachman—an elderly man—came in. He was preceded by a relishing odour of whisky—but his head was Scotch; and nothing but his odour betrayed him.

'I have a document here to sign,' said Noel Vanstone, repeating his lesson; 'and I wish you to write your names on it, as witnesses of my signature.'

The coachman looked at the will. The cook never removed her eyes from Mrs. Lecount.

'Ye'll no object, sir,' said the coachman, with the national caution showing itself in every wrinkle on his face —"ye'll no object, sir, to tell me, first, what the Doecument may be?'

Mrs. Lecount interposed before Noel Vanstone's indignation could express itself in words.

'You must tell the man, sir, that this is your Will,' she . said. 'When he witnesses your signature, he can see as much for himself if he looks at the top of the page.'

'Ay, ay,' said the coachman, looking at the top of the page immediately. 'His last Wull and Testament. Hech, sirs! there's a sair confronting of Death, in a Doecument like yon! A' flesh is grass,' continued the coachman, exhaling an additional puff of whisky, and looking up devoutly at the ceiling. 'Tak' those words in connection with that other Screepture:—Many are ca'ad but few are chosen. Tak' that again, in connection with Rev'lations, Chapter the First; verses, One to Fefteen. Lay the whole to heart—and what's your Walth, then? Dross, sirs! And your body? (Screepture again.) Clay for the potter! And your life? (Screepture once more.) The Breeth o' your Nostrils!'

The cook listened as if the cook was at church—but she never removed her eyes from Mrs. Lecount.

'You had better sign, sir. This is apparently some custom prevalent in Dumfries during the transaction of business,' said Mrs. Lecount resignedly. 'The man means well, I dare say.'

She added those last words in a soothing tone, for she saw that Noel Vanstone's indignation was fast merging into alarm. The coachman's outburst of exhortation seemed to have inspired him with fear, as well as disgust.

He dipped the pen in the ink, and signed the Will without uttering a word. The coachman (descending instantly from Theology to Business) watched the signature with the most scrupulous attention; and signed his own name as witness, with an implied commentary on the proceeding, in the form of another puff of whisky, exhaled through the medium of a heavy sigh. The cook looked away from Mrs. Lecount with an effort—signed her name in a violent hurry—and looked back again with a start, as if she expected to see a loaded pistol (produced in the interval) in the housekeeper's hands. 'Thank you,' said Mrs. Lecount, in her friendliest manner. The cook shut up her lips aggressively and looked at her master. 'You may go!' said her master. The cook coughed contemptuously—and went.

'We sha'n't keep you long,' said Mrs. Lecount, dismissing the coachman. 'In half an hour, or less, we shall be ready for the journey back.'

The coachman's austere countenance relaxed for the first time. He smiled mysteriously, and approached Mrs. Lecount on tiptoe.

'Ye'll no forget one thing, my leddy,' he said, with the most ingratiating politeness. 'Ye'll no forget the witnessing as weel as the driving, when ye pay me for my day's wark!' He laughed with guttural gravity; and,

leaving his atmosphere behind him, stalked out of the room.

‘Lecount,’ said Noel Vanstone, as soon as the coachman closed the door. ‘Did I hear you tell that man we should be ready in half an hour?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Are you blind?’

He asked the question with an angry stamp of his foot. Mrs. Lecount looked at him in astonishment.

‘Can’t you see the brute is drunk?’ he went on, more and more irritably. ‘Is my life nothing? Am I to be left at the mercy of a drunken coachman? I won’t trust that man to drive me, for any consideration under heaven! I’m surprised you could think of it, Lecount.’

‘The man has been drinking, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘It is easy to see, and to smell, that. But he is evidently used to drinking. If he is sober enough to walk quite straight—which he certainly does—and to sign his name in an excellent handwriting—which you may see for yourself on the Will—I venture to think he is sober enough to drive us to Dumfries.’

‘Nothing of the sort! You’re a foreigner, Lecount; you don’t understand these people. They drink whisky from morning to night. Whisky is the strongest spirit that’s made; whisky is notorious for its effect on the brain. I tell you, I won’t run the risk. I never was driven, and I never will be driven, by anybody but a sober man.’

‘Must I go back to Dumfries by myself, sir?’

‘And leave me here? Leave me alone in this house after what has happened? How do I know my wife may not come back to-night? How do I know her journey is not a blind to mislead me? Have you no feeling, Lecount? Can you leave me in my miserable situation———?’ He sank into a chair and burst out crying over his own idea, before he had completed the expression of it in words. ‘Too bad!’ he said, with his handkerchief over his face—‘too bad!’

It was impossible not to pity him. If ever mortal was pitiable, he was the man. He had broken down at last, under the conflict of violent emotions which had been roused in him, since the morning. The effort to follow Mrs. Lecount along the mazes of intricate combination through which she had steadily led the way, had upheld him while that effort lasted: the moment it was at an end, he dropped. The coachman had hastened a result—of which the coachman was far from being the cause.

‘You surprise me, you distress me, sir,’ said Mrs. Lecount. ‘I entreat you to compose yourself. I will stay here, if you wish it, with pleasure—I will stay here to-night, for your sake. You want rest and quiet after this dreadful day. The coachman shall be instantly sent away, Mr. Noel. I will give him a note to the landlord of the hotel,—and the carriage shall come back for us to-morrow morning, with another man to drive it.’

The prospect which those words presented, cheered him. He wiped his eyes, and kissed Mrs. Lecount’s hand.

‘Yes!’ he said faindy; ‘send the coachman away—and you stop here. You good creature! You excellent Lecount! Send the drunken brute away, and come back direcdy. We will be comfortable by the fire, Lecount—and have a nice litde dinner—and try to make it like old times.’ His weak voice faltered; he returned to the fireside, and melted into tears again under the pathetic influence of his own idea.

Mrs. Lecount left him for a minute to dismiss the coachman. When she returned to the parlour, she found him

with his hand on the bell.

‘What do you want, sir?’ she asked.

‘I want to tell the servants to get your room ready,’ he answered. ‘I wish to show you every attention, Lecount.’

‘You are all kindness, Mr. Noel—but wait one moment. It may be well to have these papers put out of the way, before the servant comes in again. If you will place the Will and the Sealed Letter together in one envelope—and if you will direct it to the admiral—I will take care that the enclosure so addressed is safely placed in his own hands. Will you come to the table, Mr. Noel, only for one minute more?’

No! He was obstinate; he refused to move from the fire; he was sick and tired of writing; he wished he had never been bom, and he loathed the sight of pen and ink. All Mrs. Lecount’s patience, and all Mrs. Lecount’s persuasion, were required to induce him to write the admiral’s address for the second time. She only succeeded by bringing the blank envelope to him upon the paper-case, and putting it coaxingly on his lap. He grumbled, he even swore, but he directed the envelope at last, in these terms: ‘To Admiral Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. Favoured by Mrs. Lecount.’ With that final act of compliance, his docility came to end. He refused, in the fiercest terms, to seal the envelope.

There was no need to press this proceeding on him. His seal lay ready on the table; and it mattered nothing whether he used it, or whether a person in his confidence used it for him. Mrs. Lecount sealed the envelope, with its two important enclosures placed safely inside.

She opened her travelling-bag for the last time, and pausing for a moment before she put the sealed packet away, looked at it with a triumph too deep for words. She smiled as she dropped it into the bag. Not the shadow of a suspicion that the Will might contain superfluous phrases and expressions which no practical lawyer would have used; not the vestige of a doubt whether the Letter was quite as complete a document as a practical lawyer might have made it, troubled her mind. In blind reliance—bom of her hatred for Magdalen and her hunger for revenge—in blind reliance on her own abilities, and on her friend’s law, she trusted the future implicitly to the promise of the morning’s work.

As she locked her travelling-bag, Noel Vanstone rang the bell. On this occasion, the summons was answered by Louisa.

‘Get the spare room ready,’ said her master; ‘this lady will sleep here to-night. And air my warm things; this lady and I are going away to-morrow morning.’

The civil and submissive Louisa received her orders in sullen silence—darted an angry look at her master’s impenetrable guest—and left the room. The servants were evidently all attached to their mistress’s interests, and were all of one opinion on the subject of Mrs. Lecount.

‘That’s done!’ said Noel Vanstone, with a sigh of infinite relief. ‘Come and sit down, Lecount. Let’s be comfortable—let’s gossip over the fire.’

Mrs. Lecount accepted the invitation; and drew an easy-chair to his side. He took her hand with a confidential tenderness, and held it in his, while the talk went on. A stranger, looking in through the window, would have taken them for mother and son; and would have thought to himself, ‘What a happy home!’

The gossip, led by Noel Vanstone, consisted as usual of an endless string of questions, and was devoted entirely to the subject of himself and his future prospects. Where would Lecount take him to, when they went away the next morning? Why to London? Why should he be left in London, while Lecount went on to St. Crux to give the

admiral the Letter and the Will? Because his wife might follow him, if he went to the admiral's? Well, there was something in that. And because he ought to be safely concealed from her, in some comfortable lodging, near Mr. Loscombe? Why near Mr. Loscombe? Ah, yes, to be sure—to know what the law would do to help him. Would the law set him free from the Wretch who had deceived him? How tiresome of Lecount not to know! Would the law say he had gone and married himself a second time, because he had been living with the Wretch, like husband and wife, in Scotland? Anything that publicly assumed to be a marriage, was a marriage (he had heard) in Scotland.* How excessively tiresome of Lecount to sit there, and say she knew nothing about it! Was he to stay long in London, by himself, with nobody but Mr. Loscombe to speak to? Would Lecount come back to him, as soon as she had put those important papers in the admiral's own hands? Would Lecount consider herself still in his service? The good Lecount! the excellent Lecount! And after all the law-business was over—what then? Why not leave this horrid England, and go abroad again? Why not go to France, to some cheap place, near Paris? Say Versailles? say St. Germain? In a nice little French house—cheap? With a nice French *bonne* to cook—who wouldn't waste his substance in the grease-pot? With a nice little garden—where he could work himself, and get health, and save the expense of keeping a gardener? It wasn't a bad idea. And it seemed to promise well for the future—didn't it, Lecount?

So he ran on—the poor, weak creature! the abject, miserable little man!

As the darkness gathered, at the close of the short November day, he began to grow drowsy—his ceaseless questions came to an end at last—he fell asleep. The wind outside sang its mournful winter-song; the tramp of passing footsteps, the roll of passing wheels on the road, ceased in dreary silence. He slept on quiedy. The fire-light rose and fell on his wizen litde face, and his nerveless drooping hands. Mrs. Lecount had not pitied him yet. She began to pity him, now. Her point was gained; her interest in his will was secured; he had put his future life, of his own accord, under her fostering care—the fire was comfortable; the circumstances were favourable to the growth of Christian feeling. 'Poor wretch!' said Mrs. Lecount, looking at him with a grave compassion —'Poor wretch!'

The dinner-hour roused him. He was cheerful at dinner; he reverted to the idea of the cheap litde house in France; he smirked and simpered; and talked French to Mrs. Lecount, while the housemaid and Louisa waited, turn and turn about, under protest. When dinner was over he returned to his comfortable chair before the fire, and Mrs. Lecount followed him. He resumed the conversation—which meant, in his case, repeating his questions. But he was not so quick and ready with them, as he had been earlier in the day. They began to flag—they continued, at longer and longer intervals—they ceased altogether. Towards nine o'clock he fell asleep again.

It was not a quiet sleep this time. He muttered, and ground his teeth, and rolled his head from side to side of the chair. Mrs. Lecount purposely made noise enough to rouse him. He woke with a vacant eye, and a flushed cheek. He walked about the room restlessly, with a new idea in his mind—the idea of writing a terrible letter; a letter of eternal farewell to his wife. How was it to be written? In what language should he express his feelings? The powers of Shakespeare himself would be unequal to the emergency! He had been the victim of an outrage entirely without parallel. A wretch had crept into his bosom! A viper had hidden herself at his fireside! Where could words be found to brand her with the infamy she deserved? He stopped, with a suffocating sense in him of his own impotent rage—he stopped, and shook his fist tremulously in the empty air.

Mrs. Lecount interfered with an energy and a resolution inspired by serious alarm. After the heavy strain that had been laid on his weakness already, such an outbreak of passionate agitation as was now bursting from him, might be the destruction of his rest that night, and of his strength to travel the next day. With infinite difficulty, with endless promises to return to the subject, and to advise him about it in the morning, she prevailed on him,

at last, to go up-stairs and compose himself for the night. She gave him her arm to assist him. On the way up-stairs, his attention, to her great relief, became suddenly absorbed by a new fancy. He remembered a certain warm and comforting mixture of wine, egg, sugar, and spices, which she had often been accustomed to make for him, tin former times; and which he thought he should relish exceedingly, before he went to bed. Mrs. Lecount helped him on with his dressing-gown—then went down-stairs again, to make his warm drink for him at the parlour fire.

She rang the bell, and ordered the necessary ingredients for the mixture, in Noel Vanstone's name. The servants, with the small ingenious malice of their race, brought up the materials, one by one, and kept her waiting for each of them as long as possible. She had got the saucepan, and the spoon, and the tumbler, and the nutmeg-grater, and the wine—but not the egg, the sugar, or the spices—when she heard him above, walking backwards and forwards noisily in his room; exciting himself on the old subject again, beyond all doubt.

She went up-stairs once more; but he was too quick for her—he heard her outside the door; and when she opened it, she found him in his chair, with his back cunningly turned towards her. Knowing him too well to attempt any remonstrance, she merely announced the speedy arrival of the warm drink, and turned to leave the room. On her way out, she noticed a table in a corner, with an inkstand and a paper-case on it, and tried, without attracting his attention, to take the writing materials away. He was too quick for her again. He asked angrily, if she doubted his promise. She put the writing materials back on the table, for fear of offending him, and left the room.

In half an hour more, the mixture was ready. She carried it up to him, foaming and fragrant, in a large tumbler. 'He will sleep after this,' she thought to herself, as she opened the door; 'I have made it stronger than usual on purpose.'

He had changed his place. He was sitting at the table in the corner—still with his back to her, writing. This time, his quick ears had not served him. This time, she had caught him in the fact.

'Oh, Mr. Noel! Mr. Noel!' she said, reproachfully, 'what is your promise worth?'

He made no answer. He was sitting with his left elbow on the table, and with his head resting on his left hand. His right hand lay back on the paper, with the pen lying loose in it. 'Your drink, Mr. Noel,' she said in a kinder tone, feeling unwilling to offend him. He took no notice of her.

She went to the table to rouse him. Was he deep in thought?

He was dead.

the end of the fifth scene

Between the Scenes

Progress of the Story through the Post

Wilkie Collins

I. *From Mrs. Noel Vans tone to Mr. Loscombe*

‘Park Terrace, St. John’s Wood,

‘November 5th.

‘Dear Sir,

‘I came to London yesterday, for the purpose of seeing a relative, leaving Mr. Vanstone at Baliol Cottage, and proposing to return to him in the course of the week. I reached London late last night, and drove to these lodgings, having written to secure accommodation beforehand.

‘This morning’s post has brought me a letter from my own maid, whom I left at Baliol Cottage, with instructions to write to me if anything extraordinary took place in my absence. You will find the girl’s letter enclosed in this. I have had some experience of her; and I believe she is to be strictly depended on to tell the truth.

‘I purposely abstain from troubling you by any useless allusions to myself. When you have read my maid’s letter, you will understand the shock which the news contained in it has caused me. I can only repeat, that I place implicit belief in her statement. I am firmly persuaded that my husband’s former housekeeper has found him out, has practised on his weakness in my absence, and has prevailed on him to make another Will. From what I know of this woman, I feel no doubt that she has used her influence over Mr. Vanstone, to deprive me, if possible, of all future interest in my husband’s fortune.

‘Under such circumstances as these, it is in the last degree important—for more reasons than I need mention here—that I should see Mr. Vanstone, and come to an explanation with him, at the earliest possible opportunity. You will find that my maid thoughtfully kept her letter open, until the last moment before post-time—without, however, having any later news to give me than that Mrs. Lecount was to sleep at the cottage last night, and that she and Mr. Vanstone were to leave together this morning. But for that last piece of intelligence, I should have been on my way back to Scotland before now. As it is, I cannot decide for myself what I ought to do next. My going back to Dumfries, after Mr. Vanstone has left it, seems like taking a journey for nothing—and my staying in London appears to be almost equally useless.

‘Will you kindly advise me, in this difficulty? I will come to you at Lincoln’s Inn at any time this afternoon or

to-morrow which you may appoint. My next few hours are engaged. As soon as this letter is despatched, I am going to Kensington, with the object of ascertaining whether certain doubts I feel about the means by which Mrs. Lecount may have accomplished her discovery, are well founded or not. If you will let me have your answer by return of post, I will not fail to get back to St. John's Wood in time to receive it.

'Believe me, dear Sir, yours sincerely,

'Magdalen Vanstone.'

II. *From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone*

'Lincoln's Inn, Nov. 5th.

'Dear Madam,

'Your letter and its enclosure have caused me great concern and surprise. Pressure of business allows me no hope of being able to see you either to-day or to-morrow morning. But if three o'clock to-morrow afternoon will suit you, at that hour you will find me at your service.

'I cannot pretend to offer a positive opinion, until I know more of the particulars connected with this extraordinary business than I find communicated either in your letter, or in your maid's. But with this reserve, I venture to suggest that your remaining in London until to-morrow, may possibly lead to other results besides your consultation at my chambers. There is at least a chance, that you, or I, may hear something further in this strange matter by the morning's post.

'I remain, dear Madam, faithfully yours,

'John Loscombe.'

III. *From Mrs. Noel Vanstone to Miss Garth*

'November 5th, Two o'Clock.

'I have just returned from Westmoreland House—after purposely leaving it in secret, and purposely avoiding you under your own roof. You shall know why I came, and why I went away. It is due to my remembrance of old times not to treat you like a stranger, although I can never again treat you like a friend.

'I set forth on the third from the North to London. My only object in taking this long journey, was to see Norah. I had been suffering for many weary weeks past, such remorse as only miserable women like me can feel. Perhaps, the suffering weakened me; perhaps, it roused some old forgotten tenderness—God knows!—I can't explain it; I can only tell you that I began to think of Norah by day, and to dream of Norah by night, till I was almost heart-broken. I have no better reason than this to give for running all the risks which I ran, and coming to London to see her. I don't wish to claim more for myself than I deserve; I don't wish to tell you I was the reformed and repenting creature whom *you* might have approved. I had only one feeling in me that I know of. I wanted to put my arms round Norah's neck, and cry my heart out on Norah's bosom. Childish enough, I dare

say. Something might have come of it; nothing might have come of it—who knows?

‘I had no means of finding Norah without your assistance. However you might disapprove of what I had done, I thought you would not refuse to help me to find my sister. When I lay down, last night, in my strange bed, I said to myself, “I will ask Miss Garth,. for my father’s sake and my mother’s sake, to tell me.” You don’t know what a comfort I felt in that thought. How should you? What do good women like you, know of miserable sinners like me? All you know is that you pray for us at church.

‘Well, I fell asleep happily that night—for the first time since my marriage. When the morning came, I paid the penalty of daring to be happy, only for one night. When the morning came, a letter came with it, which told me that my bitterest enemy on earth (you have meddled sufficiently with my affairs to know what enemy I mean) had revenged herself on me in my absence. In following the impulse which led me to my sister, I had gone to my ruin.

‘The mischief was beyond all present remedy, when I received the news of it. Whatever had happened, whatever might happen, I made up my mind to persist in my resolution of seeing Norah, before I did anything else. I suspected *you* of being concerned in the disaster which had overtaken me—because I felt positively certain at Aid-borough, that you and Mrs. Lecount had written to each other. But I never suspected Norah. If I lay on my deathbed at this moment, I could say with a safe conscience I never suspected Norah.

‘So I went this morning to Westmoreland House to ask you for my sister’s address, and to acknowledge plainly that I suspected you of being again in correspondence with Mrs. Lecount.

‘When I inquired for you at the door, they told me you had gone out, but that you were expected back before long. They asked me if I would see your sister, who was then in the schoolroom. I desired that your sister should on no account be disturbed: my business was not with her, but with you. I begged to be allowed to wait in a room by myself, until you returned.

‘They showed me into the double room on the ground floor, divided by curtains—as it was when I last remember it. There was a fire in the outer division of the room, but none in the inner; and for that reason, I suppose, the curtains were drawn. The servant was very civil and attentive to me. I have learnt to be thankful for civility and attention, and I spoke to her as cheerfully as I could. I said to her, “I shall see Miss Garth here, as she comes up to the door, and I can beckon her in, through the long window.” The servant said I could do so, if you came that way—but that you let yourself in sometimes, with your own key, by the back-garden gate; and if you did this, she would take care to let you know of my visit. I mention these trifles, to show you that there was no premeditated deceit in my mind when I came to the house.

‘I waited a weary time, and you never came: I don’t know whether my impatience made me think so, or whether the large fire burning made the room really as hot as I felt it to be—I only know that, after a while, I passed through the curtains into the inner room, to try the cooler atmosphere.

‘I walked to the long window which leads into the back garden, to look out; and almost at the same time, I heard the door opened—the door of the room I had just left—and your voice and the voice of some other woman, a stranger to me, talking. The stranger was one of the parlour-boarders, I dare say. I gathered from the first words you exchanged together, that you had met in the passage—she, on her way down stairs, and you, on your way in from the back garden. Her next question and your next answer, informed me that this person was a friend of my sister’s, who felt a strong interest in her, and who knew that you had just returned from a visit to Norah. So far, I only hesitated to show myself, because I shrank, in my painful situation, from facing a stranger. But when I heard my own name immediately afterwards on your lips and on hers—then, I purposely came nearer to the

curtain between us, and purposely listened.

‘A mean action, you will say? Call it mean, if you like. What better can you expect from such a woman as I am?

‘You were always famous for your memory. There is no necessity for my repeating the words you spoke to your friend, and the words your friend spoke to you, hardly an hour since. When you read these lines, you will know, as well as I know, what those words told me. I ask for no particulars; I will take all your reasons and all your excuses for granted. It is enough for me to know that you and Mr. Pendril have been searching for me again, and that Norah is in the conspiracy this time, to reclaim me in spite of myself. It is enough for me to know, that my letter to my sister has been turned into a trap to catch me, and that Mrs. Lecount’s revenge has accomplished its object by means of information received from Norah’s lips.

‘Shall I tell you what I suffered, when I heard these things? No: it would only be a waste of time to tell you. Whatever I suffer, I deserve it—don’t I?

‘I waited in that inner room—knowing my own violent temper, and not trusting myself to see you, after what I had heard;—I waited in that inner room, trembling lest the servant should tell you of my visit, before I could find an opportunity of leaving the house. No such misfortune happened. The servant, no doubt, heard the voices up-stairs, and supposed that we had met each other in the passage. I don’t know how long, or how short a time it was, before you left the room to go and take off your bonnet—you went and your friend went with you. I raised the long window softly, and stepped into the back garden. The way by which you returned to the house, was the way by which I left it. No blame attaches to the servant. As usual, where I am concerned, nobody is to blame but me.

‘Time enough has passed now to quiet my mind a little. You know how strong I am? You remember how I used to fight against all my illnesses, when I was a child? Now I am a woman, I fight against my miseries in the same way. Don’t pity me, Miss Garth! Don’t pity me!

‘I have no harsh feeling against Norah. The hope I had of seeing her, is a hope taken from me; the consolation I had in writing to her, is a consolation denied me for the future. I am cut to the heart—but I have no angry feeling towards my sister. She means well, poor soul—I dare say she means well. It would distress her, if she knew what has happened. Don’t tell her. Conceal my visit, and burn my letter.

‘A last word to yourself and I have done:—

‘If I rightly understand my present situation, your spies are still searching for me to just as little purpose as they searched at York. Dismiss them—you are wasting your money to no purpose. If you discovered me to-morrow, what could you do? My position has altered. I am no longer the poor outcast girl, the vagabond public performer, whom you once hunted after. I have done, what I told you I would do—I have made the general sense of propriety my accomplice this time. Do you know who I am? I am a respectable married woman, accountable for my actions to nobody under heaven but my husband. I have got a place in the world, and a name in the world, at last. Even the law, which is the friend of all you respectable people, has recognized my existence, and has become *my* friend too! The Archbishop of Canterbury gave me his licence to be married, and the vicar of Aldborough performed the service. If I found your spies following me in the street, and if I chose to claim protection from them, the law would acknowledge my claim. You forget what wonders my wickedness has done for me. It has made Nobody’s Child, Somebody’s Wife.

‘If you will give these considerations their due weight; if you will exert your excellent common sense, I have no fear of being obliged to appeal to my newly-found friend and protector—the law. You will feel, by this time, that you have meddled with me at last to some purpose. I am estranged from Norah—I am discovered by my

husband—I am defeated by Mrs. Lecount. You have driven me to the last extremity; you have strengthened me to fight the battle of my fife, with the resolution which only a lost and friendless woman can feel. Badly as your schemes have prospered, they have not proved totally useless after all!

‘I have no more to say. If you ever speak about me to Norah, tell her that a day may come when she will see me again—the day when we two sisters have recovered our natural rights; the day when I put Norah’s fortune into Norah’s hand.

‘Those are my last words. Remember them the next time you feel tempted to meddle with me again.

‘Magdalen Vanstone.’

IV. From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone

‘Lincoln’s Inn, November 6th.

‘Dear Madam,

‘This morning’s post has doubtless brought you the same shocking news which it has brought to me. You must know, by this time, that a terrible affliction has befallen you—the affliction of your husband’s sudden death.

‘I am on the point of starting for the North, to make all needful inquiries, and to perform whatever duties I may with propriety undertake, as solicitor to the deceased gentleman. Let me earnestly recommend you not to follow me to Baliol Cottage, until I have had time to write to you first, and to give you such advice as I cannot, through ignorance of all the circumstances, pretend to offer now. You may rely on my writing after my arrival in Scotland, by the first post.

‘I remain, dear Madam, faithfully yours,

‘John Loscombe.’

V. *From Mr. Pendril to Miss Garth*

‘Serle Street, Nov. 6th.

‘Dear Miss Garth,

‘I return you Mrs. Noel Vanstone’s letter. I can understand your mortification at the tone in which it is written, and your distress at the manner in which this unhappy woman has interpreted the conversation that she overheard at your house. I cannot honestly add that I lament what has happened. My opinion has never altered since the Combe-Raven time. I believe Mrs. Noel Vanstone to be one of the most reckless, desperate, and perverted women living; and any circumstances that estrange her from her sister, are circumstances which I welcome, for her sister’s sake.

‘There cannot be a moment’s doubt on the course you ought to follow in this matter. Even Mrs. Noel Vanstone

herself acknowledges the propriety of sparing her sister additional, and unnecessary, distress. By all means, keep Miss Vanstone in ignorance of the visit to Kensington, and of the letter which has followed it. It would be not only unwise, but absolutely cruel, to enlighten her. If we had any remedy to apply, or even any hope to offer, we might feel some hesitation in keeping our secret. But there is no remedy, and no hope. Mrs. Noel Vanstone is perfectly justified in the view she takes of her own position. Neither you nor I can assert the smallest right to control her.

'I have already taken the necessary measures for putting an end to our useless inquiries. In a few days I will write to Miss Vanstone, and will do my best to tranquillize her mind on the subject of her sister. If I can find no sufficient excuse to satisfy her, it will be better she should think we have discovered nothing, than that she should know the truth.

'Believe me, most truly yours,

'William Pendril.'

VI. *From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone*

'Lincoln's Inn, Nov. 15th.

'Private.

'Dear Madam,

'In compliance with your request, I now proceed to communicate to you in writing, what (but for the calamity which has so recently befallen you) I should have preferred communicating by word of mouth. Be pleased to consider this letter as strictly confidential between yourself and me.

'I enclose, as you desire, a copy of the Will executed by your late husband on the third of this month. There can be no question of the genuineness of the original document. I protested, as a matter of form, against Admiral Bartram's solicitor assuming a position of authority at Baliol Cottage. But he took the position, nevertheless; acting as legal representative of the sole Executor under the second Will. I am bound to say I should have done the same myself in his place.

'The serious question follows—what can we do for the best, in your interests? The Will executed under my professional superintendence, on the thirtieth of September last, is at present superseded and revoked by the second and later Will, executed on the third of November. Can we dispute this document?

'I doubt the possibility of disputing the new Will, on the face of it. It is no doubt irregularly expressed—but it is dated, signed, and witnessed as the law directs; and the perfectly simple and straightforward provisions that it contains, are in no respect, that I can see, technically open to attack.

'This being the case, can we dispute the Will, on the ground that it has been executed when the Testator was not in a fit state to dispose of his own property? or when the Testator was subjected to undue and improper influence?

'In the first of these cases, the medical evidence would put an obstacle in our way. We cannot assert that previous illness had weakened the Testator's mind. It is clear that he died suddenly, as the doctors had all along

declared he would die, of disease of the heart. He was out walking in his garden, as usual, on the day of his death; he ate a hearty dinner; none of the persons in his service noticed any change in him; he was a little more irritable with them than usual, but that was all. It is impossible to attack the state of his faculties: there is no case to go into court with, so far.

‘Can we declare that he acted under undue influence—or, in plainer terms, under the influence of Mrs. Lecount?

‘There are serious difficulties, again, in the way of taking this course. We cannot assert, for example, that Mrs. Lecount has assumed a place in the will, which she has no fair claim to occupy. She has cunningly limited her own legacy, not only to what is fairly her due, but to what the late Mr. Michael Vanstone himself had the intention of leaving her. If I were examined on the subject, I should be compelled to acknowledge that I had heard him express this intention myself. It is only the truth to say, that I have heard him express it more than once. There is no point of attack in Mrs. Lecount’s legacy; and there is no point of attack in your late husband’s choice of an executor. He has made the wise choice, and the natural choice, of the oldest and trustiest friend he had in the world.

‘One more consideration remains—the most important which I have yet approached, and therefore the consideration which I have reserved to the last. On the thirtieth of September, the Testator executes a will, leaving his widow sole executrix, with a legacy of eighty thousand pounds. On the third of November following, he expressly revokes this will, and leaves another in its stead, in which his widow is never once mentioned, and in which the whole residue of his estate, after payment of one comparatively trifling legacy, is left to a friend.

‘It rests entirely with you to say, whether any valid reason can, or can not, be produced to explain such an extraordinary proceeding as this. If no reason can be assigned—and I know of none myself—I think we have a point here, which deserves our careful consideration; for it may be a point which is open to attack. Pray understand that I am now appealing to you solely as a lawyer, who is obliged to look all possible eventualities in the face. I have no wish to intrude on your private affairs; I have no wish to write a word which could be construed into any indirect reflection on yourself.

‘If you tell me that so far as you know, your husband capriciously struck you out of his will, without assignable reason or motive for doing so, and without other obvious explanation of his conduct, than that he acted in this matter entirely under the influence of Mrs. Lecount—I will immediately take Counsel’s opinion touching the propriety of disputing the will on this ground. If, on the other hand, you tell me that there are reasons (known to yourself though unknown to me) for not taking the course I propose, I will accept that intimation without troubling you, unless you wish it, to explain yourself further. In this latter event, I will write to you again—for I shall then have something more to say, which may greatly surprise you, on the subject of the Will.

‘Faithfully yours,

‘John Loscombe.’

VII. From Mrs. Moel Vanstone to Mr. Loscombe

‘Nov. 16th.

‘Dear Sir,

‘Accept my best thanks for the kindness and consideration with which you have treated me—and let the anxieties under which I am now suffering plead my excuse, if I reply to your letter without ceremony, in the fewest possible words.

‘I have my own reasons for not hesitating to answer your question in the negative. It is impossible for us to go to law, as you propose, on the subject of the Will.

‘Believe me, dear Sir, yours gratefully,

‘Magdalen Vanstone.’

VIII. *From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Moel Vanstone*

‘Lincoln’s Inn, November 17th.

‘Dear Madam,

‘I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter, answering my proposal in the negative, for reasons of your own. Under these circumstances—on which I offer no comment—I beg to perform my promise of again communicating with you, on the subject of your late husband’s Will.

‘Be so kind as to look at your copy of the document. You will find that the clause which devises the whole residue of your husband’s estate to Admiral Bartram, ends in these terms: *to be by him applied to such uses as he may think Jit*.

‘Simple as they may seem to you, these are very remarkable words. In the first place, no practical lawyer would have used them, in drawing your husband’s will. In the second place, they are utterly useless to serve any plain straightforward purpose. The legacy is left unconditionally to the admiral; and in the same breath he is told that he may do what he likes with it! The phrase points clearly to one of two conclusions. It has either dropped from the writer’s pen in pure ignorance—or it has been carefully set where it appears, to serve the purpose of a snare. I am firmly persuaded that the latter explanation is the right one. The words are expressly intended to mislead some person—yourself in all probability—and the cunning which has put them to that use, is a cunning which (as constantly happens when uninstructed persons meddle with law) has overreached itself. My thirty years’ experience reads those words in a sense exactly opposite to the sense which they are intended to convey. I say that Admiral Bartram is *not* free to apply his legacy to such purposes as he may think fit—I believe he is privately controlled by a supplementary document in the shape of a Secret Trust.

‘I can easily explain to you what I mean by a Secret Trust. It is usually contained in the form of a letter from a Testator to his Executors, privately informing them of testamentary intentions on his part, which he has not thought proper openly to acknowledge in his will. I leave you a hundred pounds; and I write a private letter, enjoining you, on taking the legacy, not to devote it to your own purposes, but to give it to some third person, whose name I have my own reasons for not mentioning in my will. That is a Secret Trust.

‘If I am right in my own persuasion that such a document as I here describe is at this moment in Admiral Bartram’s possession—a persuasion based, in the first instance, on the extraordinary words that I have quoted to you, and, in the second instance, on purely legal considerations with which it is needless to encumber my letter—if I am right in this opinion, the discovery of the Secret Trust would be, in all probability, a most important

discovery to your interests. I will not trouble you with technical reasons, or with references to my experience in these matters, which only a professional man could understand. I will merely say that I don't give up your cause as utterly lost, until the conviction now impressed on my own mind is proved to be wrong.

'I can add no more, while this important question still remains involved in doubt; neither can I suggest any means of solving that doubt. If the existence of the Trust was proved, and if the nature of the stipulations contained in it was made known to me, I could then say positively what the legal chances were of your being able to set up a Case on the strength of it: and I could also tell you, whether I should or should not feel justified in personally undertaking that Case, under a private arrangement with yourself.

'As things are, I can make no arrangement, and offer no advice. I can only put you confidentially in possession of my private opinion; leaving you entirely free to draw your own inferences from it; and regretting that I cannot write more confidently and more definitely than I have written here. All that I could conscientiously say on this very difficult and delicate subject, I have said.

'Believe me, dear Madam, faithfully yours,

'John Losgombe.

'P.S.—I omitted one consideration in my last letter, which I may mention here, in order to show you that no point in connection with the case has escaped me. If it had been possible to show that Mr. Vanstone was *domiciled* in Scodand at the time of his death, we might have asserted your interests by means of the Scotch law —which does not allow a husband the power of absolutely disinheriting his wife. But it is impossible to assert that Mr. Vanstone was legally domiciled in Scodand. He came there as a visitor only; he occupied a furnished house for the season; and he never expressed, either by word or deed, the slightest intention of settling permanently in the North.'*

IX. *From Mrs. Noel Vanstone to Mr. Loscombe*

'Dear Sir,

'I have read your letter more than once, with the deepest interest and attention—and the oftener I read it, the more firmly I believe that there is really such a Letter as you mention in Admiral Bartram's hands.

'It is my interest that the discovery should be made—and I at once acknowledge to you, that I am determined to find the means of secretly and certainly making it. My resolution rests on other motives than the motives which you might naturally suppose would influence me. I only tell you this, in case you feel inclined to remonstrate. There is good reason for what I say, when I assure you that remonstrance will be useless.

'I ask for no assistance in this matter; I will trouble nobody for advice. You shall not be involved in any rash proceedings on my part. Whatever danger there may be, I will risk it. Whatever delays may happen, I will bear them patiently. I am lonely and friendless and sorely troubled in mind—but I am strong enough to win my way through worse trials than these. My spirits will rise again, and my time will come. If that Secret Trust is in Admiral Bartram's possession—when you next see me, you shall see me with it in my own hands.

'Yours gratefully,

‘Magdalen Vanstone.’

The Sixth Scene

St. John's Wood

Wilkie Collins

Chapter I

It wanted little more than a fortnight to Christmas; but the weather showed no signs yet of the frost and snow, conventionally associated with the coming season. The atmosphere was unnaturally warm; and the old year was dying feebly in sapping rain and enervating mist.

Towards the close of the December afternoon, Magdalen sat alone in the lodging which she had occupied since her arrival in London. The fire burnt sluggishly in the narrow litde grate; the view of the wet houses and soaking gardens opposite was darkening fast; and the bell of the suburban muffin-boy tinkled in the distance drearily. Sitting close over the fire, with a little money lying loose in her lap, Magdalen absently shifted the coins to and fro on the smooth surface of her dress; incessantly altering their positions towards each other, as if they were pieces of a 'child's puzzle' which she was trying to put together. The dim firelight flaming up on her faintly from time to time, showed changes which would have told their own tale sadly to friends of former days. Her dress had become loose through the wasting of her figure; but she had not cared to alter it. The old restlessness in her movements, the old mobility in her expression, appeared no more. Her face passively maintained its haggard composure, its changeless unnatural calm. Mr. Pendril might have softened his hard sentence on her, if he had seen her now; and Mrs. Lecount, in the plenitude of her triumph, might have pitied her fallen enemy at last.

Hardly four months had passed, since the wedding-day at Aldborough; and the penalty for that day was paid already—paid in unavailing remorse, in hopeless isolation, in irremediable defeat! Let this be said for her; let the truth which has been told of the fault, be told of the expiation as well. Let it be recorded of her that she enjoyed no secret triumph on the day of her success. The horror of herself with which her own act had inspired her, had risen to its climax when the design of her marriage was achieved. She had never suffered in secret, as she suffered when the Combe-Raven money was left to her in her husband's will. She had never felt the means taken to accomplish her end so unutterably degrading to herself, as she felt them on the day when the end was reached. Out of that feeling had grown the remorse, which had hurried her to seek pardon and consolation in her sister's love. Never since it had first entered her heart, never since she had first felt it sacred to her at her father's grave, had the Purpose to which she had vowed herself, so nearly lost its hold on her as at this time. Never might Norah's influence have achieved such good, as on the day when that influence was lost—the day when the fatal words were overheard at Miss Garth's—the day when the fatal letter from Scotland told of Mrs. Lecoutit's revenge.

The harm was done; the chance was gone. Time and Hope alike, had both passed her by.

Faintly and more faintly, the inner voices now pleaded with her to pause on the downward way. The discovery which had poisoned her heart with its first distrust of her sister; the tidings which had followed it of her husband's death; the sting of Mrs. Lecount's triumph, felt through all—had done their work. The remorse which had embittered her married life, was deadened now to a dull despair. It was too late to make the atonement of confession—too late to lay bare to the miserable husband, the deeper secrets that had once lurked in the heart of the miserable wife. Innocent of all thought of the hideous treachery which Mrs. Lecount had imputed to her—she was guilty of knowing how his health was broken when she married him; guilty of knowing, when he left her the Combe-Raven money, that the accident of a moment, harmless to other men, might place his life in jeopardy, and effect her release. His death had told her this—had told her plainly, what she had shrunk, in his lifetime, from openly acknowledging to herself. From the dull torment of that reproach; from the dreary wretchedness of doubting everybody, even to Norah herself; from the bitter sense of her defeated schemes; from the blank solitude of her friendless life—what refuge was left? But one refuge now. She turned to the relentless Purpose which was hurrying her to her ruin, and cried to it with the daring of her despair—Drive me on!

For days and days together, she had bent her mind on the one object which occupied it, since she had received the lawyer's letter. For days and days together, she had toiled to meet the first necessity of her position—to find a means of discovering the Secret Trust. There was no hope, this time, of assistance from Captain Wragge. Long practice had made the old militiaman an adept in the art of vanishing. The plough of the moral agriculturist left no furrows—not a trace of him was to be found! Mr. Loscombe was too cautious to commit himself to an active course of any kind: he passively maintained his opinion, and left the rest to his client—he desired to know nothing, until the Trust was placed in his hands. Magdalen's interests were now in Magdalen's own sole care. Risk, or no risk, what she did next, she must do by herself.

The prospect had not daunted her. Alone, she had calculated the chances that might be tried. Alone, she was now determined to make the attempt.

'The time has come,' she said to herself, as she sat over the fire. 'I must sound Louisa first.'

She collected the scattered coins in her lap, and placed them in a little heap on the table—then rose, and rang the bell. The landlady answered it.

'Is my servant down stairs?' inquired Magdalen.

'Yes, ma'am. She is having her tea.'

'When she has done, say I want her up here. Wait a moment. You will find your money on the table—the money I owe you for last week. Can you find it? or would you like to have a candle?'

'It's rather dark, ma'am.'

Magdalen lit a candle. 'What notice must I give you,' she asked, as she put the candle on the table, 'before I leave?'

'A week is the usual notice, ma'am. I hope you have no objection to make to the house?'

'None whatever. I only ask the question, because I may be obliged to leave these lodgings rather sooner than I anticipated. Is the money right?'

'Quite right, ma'am. Here is your receipt.'

‘Thank you. Don’t forget to send Louisa to me, as soon as she has done her tea.’

The landlady withdrew. As soon as she was alone again, Magdalen extinguished the candle, and drew an empty chair close to her own chair, on the hearth. This done, she resumed her former place, and waited until Louisa appeared. There was doubt in her face, as she sat looking mechanically into the fire. ‘A poor chance,’ she thought to herself; ‘but, poor as it is, a chance that I must try.’

In ten minutes more, Louisa’s meek knock was softly audible outside. She was surprised on entering the room, to find no other light in it than the light of the fire.

‘Will you have the candles, ma’am?’ she inquired respect-fully.

‘We will have candles if you wish for them yourself,’ replied Magdalen; ‘not otherwise. I have something to say to you. When I have said it, you shall decide whether we sit together in the dark or in the light.’

Louisa waited near the door, and listened to those strange words in silent astonishment.

‘Come here,’ said Magdalen, pointing to the empty chair; ‘come here and sit down.’

Louisa advanced, and timidly removed the chair from its position at her mistress’s side. Magdalen instantly drew it back again. ‘No!’ she said. ‘Come closer—come close by me.’ After a moment’s hesitation, Louisa obeyed.

‘I ask you to sit near me,’ pursued Magdalen, ‘because I wish to speak to you on equal terms. Whatever distinctions there might once have been between us, are now at an end. I am a lonely woman thrown helpless on my own resources, without rank or place in the world. I may or may not keep you as my friend. As mistress and maid, the connection between us must come to an end.’

‘Oh, ma’am, don’t, don’t say that!’ pleaded Louisa, faintly.

Magdalen sorrowfully and steadily went on.

‘When you first came to me,’ she resumed, ‘I thought I should not like you. I have learnt to like you—I have learnt to be grateful to you. From first to last you have been faithful and good to me. The least I can do in return, is not to stand in the way of your future prospects.’

‘Don’t send me away, ma’am!’ said Louisa, imploringly. ‘If you can only help me with a little money now and then, I’ll wait for my wages—I will indeed.’

Magdalen took her hand, and went on, as sorrowfully and as steadily as before.

‘My future life is all darkness, all uncertainty,’ she said. ‘The next step I take may lead me to my prosperity or may lead me to my ruin. Can I ask you to share such a prospect as this? If your future was as uncertain as mine is—if you, too, were a friendless woman thrown on the world—my conscience might be easy in letting you cast your lot with mine. I might accept your attachment, for I might feel I was not wronging you. How can I feel this in your case? You have a future to look to. You are an excellent servant; you can get another place—a far better place than mine. You can refer to me; and if the character I give is not considered sufficient, you can refer to the mistress you served before me———’

At the instant when that reference to the girl’s last employer escaped Magdalen’s lips, Louisa snatched her hand away, and started up affiightedly from her chair. There was a moment’s silence. Both mistress and maid were equally taken by surprise.

Magdalen was the first to recover herself.

‘Is it getting too dark?’ she asked, significantly. ‘Are you going to light the candles, after all?’

Louisa drew back into the dimmest comer of the room.

‘You suspect me, ma’am!’ she answered out of the darkness, in a breathless whisper. ‘Who has told you? How did you find out———?’ She stopped, and burst into tears. ‘I deserve your suspicion,’ she said, struggling to compose herself. ‘I can’t deny it to *you*. You have treated me so kindly; you have made me so fond of you! Forgive me, Mrs. Vanstone—I am a wretch; I have deceived you.’

‘Come here, and sit down by me again,’ said Magdalen. ‘Come—or I will get up myself, and bring you back.’

Louisa slowly returned to her place. Dim as the firelight was, she seemed to fear it. She held her handkerchief over her face, and shrank from her mistress as she seated herself again in the chair.

‘You are wrong in thinking that any one has betrayed you to me,’ said Magdalen. ‘All that I know of you is, what your own looks and ways have told me. You have had some secret trouble weighing on your mind ever since you have been in my service. I confess I have spoken with the wish to find out more of you and your past life than I have found out yet—not because I am curious, but because I have my secret troubles, too. Are you an unhappy woman, like me? If you are, I will take you into my confidence. If you have nothing to tell me—if you choose to keep your secret—I don’t blame you; I only say, Let us part. I won’t ask how you have deceived me. I will only remember that you have been an honest and faithful and competent servant, while I have employed you—and I will say as much in your favour to any new mistress you like to send to me.’

She waited for the reply. For a moment, and only for a moment, Louisa hesitated. The girl’s nature was weak, but not depraved. She was honestly attached to her mistress; and she spoke with a courage which Magdalen had not expected from her.

‘If you send me away, ma’am,’ she said, ‘I won’t take my character from you till I have told you the truth; I won’t return your kindness by deceiving you a second time. Did my master ever tell you how he engaged me?’

‘No. I never asked him, and he never told me.’

‘He engaged me, ma’am, with a written character———’

‘Yes?’

‘The character was a false one.’

Magdalen drew back in amazement. The confession she heard, was not the confession she had anticipated.

‘Did your mistress refuse to give you a character?’ she asked. ‘Why?’

Louisa dropped on her knees, and hid her face in her mistress’s lap. ‘Don’t ask me!’ she said. ‘I’m a miserable, degraded creature; I’m not fit to be in the same room with you!’

Magdalen bent over her, and whispered a question in her ear. Louisa whispered back the one sad word of reply.

‘Has he deserted you?’ asked Magdalen, after waiting a moment, and thinking first.

‘No.’

‘Do you love him?’

‘Dearly.’

The remembrance of her own loveless marriage stung Magdalen to the quick.

‘For God’s sake, don’t kneel to *me!’* she cried, passionately. ‘If there is a degraded woman in this room, I am the woman—not you!’

She raised the girl by main force from her knees, and put her back in the chair. They both waited a little in silence. Keeping her hand on Louisa’s shoulder, Magdalen seated herself again, and looked with unutterable bitterness of sorrow into the dying fire. ‘Oh,’ she thought, ‘what happy women there are in the world! Wives who love their husbands! Mothers who are not ashamed to own their children! Are you quieter?’ she asked, gently addressing Louisa once more. ‘Can you answer me, if I ask you something else? Where is the child?’

‘The child is out at nurse.’

‘Does the father help to support it?’

‘He does all he can, ma’am.’

‘What is he? Is he in service? Is he in a trade?’

‘His father is a master-carpenter—he works in his father’s yard.’

‘If he has got work, why has he not married you?’

‘It is his father’s fault, ma’am—not his. His father has no pity on us. He would be turned out of house and home, if he married me.’

‘Can he get no work elsewhere?’

‘It’s hard to get good work in London, ma’am. There are so many in London—they take the bread out of each other’s mouths. If we had only had the money to emigrate, he would have married me long since.’

‘Would he marry you, if you had the money now?’

‘I am sure he would, ma’am. He could get plenty of work in Australia, and double and treble the wages he gets here. He is trying hard, and I am trying hard, to save a litde towards it—I put by all I can spare from my child. But it is so little! If we live for years to come, there seems no hope for us. I know I have done wrong every way—I know I don’t deserve to be happy. But how could I let my child suffer?—I was obliged to go to service. My mistress was hard on me, and my health broke down in trying to live by my needle. I would never have deceived anybody by a false character, if there had been another chance for me. I was alone and helpless, ma’am; and I can only ask you to forgive me.’

‘Ask better women than I am,’ said Magdalen, sadly. ‘I am only fit to feel for you; and I do feel for you with all my heart. In your place I should have gone into service with a false character too. Say no more of the past—you don’t know how you hurt me in speaking of it. Talk of the future. I think I can help you—and do you no harm. I think you can help me, and do me the greatest of all services, in return. Wait, and you shall hear what I mean. Suppose you were married—how much would it cost for you and your husband to emigrate?’

Louisa mentioned the cost of a steerage passage to Australia for a man and his wife. She spoke in low, hopeless

tones. Moderate as the sum was, it looked like unattainable wealth in her eyes.

Magdalen started in her chair, and took the girl's hand once more.

'Louisa!' she said, earnestly. 'If I gave you the money, what would you do for me in return?'

The proposal seemed to strike Louisa speechless with astonishment. She trembled violendy, and said nothing. Magdalen repeated her words.

'Oh, ma'am, do you mean it?' said the girl. 'Do you really mean it?'

'Yes,' replied Magdalen; 'I really mean it. What would you do for me in return?'

'Do?' repeated Louisa. 'Oh, what is there I would *not* do!' She tried to kiss her mistress's hand; but Magdalen would not permit it. She resolutely, almost roughly, drew her hand away.

'I am laying you under no obligation,' she said. 'We are serving each other—that is all. Sit quiet, and let me think.'

For the next ten minutes there was silence in the room. At the end of that time, Magdalen took out her watch, and held it close to the grate. There was just firelight enough to show her the hour. It was close on six o'clock.

'Are you composed enough to go down-stairs, and deliver a message?' she asked, rising from her chair as she spoke to Louisa again. 'It is a very simple message—it is only to tell the boy that I want a cab, as soon as he can get me one. I must go out immediately. You shall know why, later in the evening. I have much more to say to you—but there is no time to say it now. When I am gone, bring your work up here, and wait for my return. I shall be back before bed-time.'

Without another word of explanation, she hurriedly lit a candle, and withdrew into the bedroom to put on her bonnet and shawl.

Chapter II

Between nine and ten o'clock the same evening, Louisa, waiting anxiously, heard the long-expected knock at the house door. She ran down-stairs at once, and let her mistress in.

Magdalen's face was flushed. She showed far more agitation on returning to the house than she had shown on leaving it. 'Keep your place at the table,' she said to Louisa, impatiently; 'but lay aside your work. I want you to attend carefully to what I am going to say.'

Louisa obeyed. Magdalen seated herself at the opposite side of the table, and moved the candles, so as to obtain a clear and uninterrupted view of her servant's face.

'Have you noticed a respectable elderly woman,' she began abruptly, 'who has been here once or twice, in the last fortnight, to pay me a visit?'

'Yes, ma'am: I think I let her in, the second time she came. An elderly person, named Mrs. Attwood?'

'That is the person I mean. Mrs. Attwood is Mr. Loscombe's housekeeper; not the housekeeper at his private

residence, but the housekeeper at his offices in Lincoln's Inn. I promised to go and drink tea with her, some evening this week—and I have been to-night. It is strange of me, is it not, to be on these familiar terms with a woman in Mrs. Attwood's situation?'

Louisa made no answer in words. Her face spoke for her: she could hardly avoid thinking it strange.

'I had a motive for making friends with Mrs. Attwood,' Magdalen went on. 'She is a widow, with a large family of daughters. Her daughters are all in service. One of them is an under-housemaid, in the service of Admiral Bartram, at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. I found that out from Mrs. Attwood's master: and as soon as I arrived at the discovery, I privately determined to make Mrs. Attwood's acquaintance. Stranger still, is it not?'

Louisa began to look a little uneasy. Her mistress's manner was at variance with her mistress's words—it was plainly suggestive of something startling to come.

'What attraction Mrs. Attwood finds in my society,' Magdalen continued, 'I cannot presume to say. I can only tell you, she has seen better days; she is an educated person; and she may like my society on that account. At any rate, she has readily met my advances towards her. What attraction I find in this good woman, on my side, is soon told. I have a great curiosity—an unaccountable curiosity, you will think—about the present course of household affairs at St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. Mrs. Attwood's daughter is a good girl, and constantly writes to her mother. Her mother is proud of the letters and proud of the girl, and is ready enough to talk about her daughter, and her daughter's place. That is Mrs. Attwood's attraction to *me*. You understand, so far?'

Yes—Louisa understood. Magdalen went on.

'Thanks to Mrs. Attwood, and Mrs. Attwood's daughter,' she said, 'I know some curious particulars already of the household at St. Crux. Servants' tongues and servants' letters—as I need not tell *you*—are oftener occupied with their masters and mistresses, than their masters and mistresses suppose. The only mistress at St. Crux is the housekeeper. But there is a master—Admiral Bartram. He appears to be a strange old man, whose whims and fancies amuse his servants as well as his friends. One of his fancies (the only one we need trouble ourselves to notice) is, that he had men enough about him, when he was living at sea, and that now he is living on shore, he will be waited on by women-servants alone. The one man in the house, is an old sailor, who has been all his life with his master—he is a kind of pensioner at St. Crux, and has little or nothing to do with the house-work. The other servants, in-doors, are all women; and instead of a footman to wait on him at dinner, the admiral has a parlour-maid. The parlourmaid now at St. Crux, is engaged to be married; and, as soon as her master can suit himself, she is going away. These discoveries I made some days since. But when I saw Mrs. Attwood to-night, she had received another letter from her daughter, in the interval; and that letter has helped me to find out something more. The housekeeper is at her wits' end to find a new servant. Her master insists on youth and good looks—he leaves everything else to the housekeeper—but he will have that. All the inquiries made in the neighbourhood have failed to produce the sort of parlour-maid whom the admiral wants. If nothing can be done in the next fortnight or three weeks, the housekeeper will advertise in the Times; and will come to London herself to see the applicants, and to make strict personal inquiry into their characters.'

Louisa looked at her mistress, more attentively than ever. The expression of perplexity left her face, and a shade of disappointment appeared there in its stead.

'Bear in mind what I have said,' pursued Magdalen; 'and wait a minute more, while I ask you some questions. Don't think you understand me yet—I can assure you, you don't understand me. Have you always lived in service as lady's maid?'

'No, ma'am.'

‘Have you ever lived as parlour-maid?’

‘Only in one place, ma’am—and not for long there.’

‘I suppose you lived long enough to learn your duties.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘What were your duties, besides waiting at table?’

‘I had to show visitors in.’

‘Yes—and what else?’

‘I had the plate, and the glass to look after—and the table-linen was all under my care. I had to answer all the bells, except in the bedrooms. There were other little odds and ends sometimes to do———’

‘But your regular duties were the duties you have just mentioned?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘How long ago is it, since you lived in service as parlourmaid?’

‘A little better than two years, ma’am.’

‘I suppose you have not forgotten how to wait at table, and clean plate, and the rest of it, in that time?’

At this question, Louisa’s attention, which had been wandering more and more during the progress of Magdalen’s inquiries, wandered away altogether. Her gathering anxieties got the better of her discretion, and even of her timidity. Instead of answering her mistress, she suddenly and confusedly ventured on a question of her own.

‘I beg your pardon, ma’am,’ she said. ‘Did you mean me to offer for the parlour-maid’s place at St. Crux?’

‘You?’ replied Magdalen. ‘Certainly not! Have you forgotten what I said to you in this room, before I went out? I mean you to be married, and to go to Australia with your husband and your child. You have not waited as I told you, to hear me explain myself. You have drawn your own conclusions; and you have drawn them wrong. I asked a question just now, which you have not answered—I asked if you had forgotten your parlour-maid’s duties?’

‘Oh no, ma’am!’ Louisa had replied rather unwillingly, thus far. She answered readily and confidently, now.

‘Could you teach the duties to another servant?’ asked Magdalen.

‘Yes, ma’am—easily, if she was quick and attentive.’

‘Could you teach the duties to Me?’

Louisa started and changed colour. ‘You, ma’am!’ she exclaimed, half in incredulity, half in alarm.

‘Yes,’ said Magdalen. ‘Could you qualify *me* to take the parlour-maid’s place at St. Crux?’

Plain as those words were, the bewilderment which they produced in Louisa’s mind, seemed to render her incapable of comprehending her mistress’s proposal. ‘You, ma’am!’ she repeated, vacantly.

‘I shall perhaps help you to understand this extraordinary project of mine,’ said Magdalen, ‘if I tell you plainly what the object of it is. Do you remember what I said to you about Mr. Vanstone’s will, when you came here from Scotland to join me?’

‘Yes, ma’am. You told me you had been left out of the will altogether. I’m sure my fellow-servant would never have been one of the witnesses, if she had known———’

‘Never mind that now. I don’t blame your fellow-servant—I blame nobody but Mrs. Lecount. Let me go on with what I was saying. It is not at all certain that Mrs. Lecount can do me the mischief which Mrs. Lecount intended. There is a chance that my lawyer, Mr. Loscombe, may be able to gain me what is fairly my due, in spite of the will. The chance turns on my discovering a letter, which Mr. Loscombe believes, and which I believe, to be kept privately in Admiral Bartram’s possession. I have not the least hope of getting at that letter, if I make the attempt in my own person. Mrs. Lecount has poisoned the admiral’s mind against me, and Mr. Vanstone has given him a secret to keep from me. If I wrote to him, he would not answer my letter. If I went to his house, the door would be closed in my face. I must find my way into St. Crux as a stranger—I must be in a position to look about the house, unsuspected—I must be there with plenty of time on my hands. All the circumstances are in my favour, if I am received into the house as a servant; and as a servant I mean to go.’

‘But you are a lady, ma’am,’ objected Louisa, in the greatest perplexity. ‘The servants at S{. Crux would find you out.’

‘I am not at all afraid of their finding me out,’ said Magdalen. ‘I know how to disguise myself in other people’s characters more cleverly than you suppose. Leave me to face the chances of discovery—that is my risk. Let us talk of nothing now, but what concerns *you*. Don’t decide yet whether you will, or will not, give me the help I want. Wait, and hear first what the help is. You are quick and clever at your needle. Can you make me the sort of gown which it is proper for a servant to wear—and can you alter one of my best silk dresses, so as to make it fit yourself—in a week’s time?’

‘I think I could get them done in a week, ma’am. But why am I to wear———?’

‘Wait a little, and you will see. I shall give the landlady her week’s notice to-morrow. In the interval, while you are making the dresses, I can be learning the parlour-maid’s duties. When the house-servant here has brought up the dinner, and when you and I are alone in the room—instead of your waiting on me, as usual, I will wait on you. (I am quite serious; don’t interrupt me!) Whatever I can leam besides, without hindering you, I will practise carefully at every opportunity. When the week is over, and the dresses are done, we will leave this place, and go into other lodgings—you as the mistress; and I as the maid.’

‘I should be found out, ma’am,’ interposed Louisa, trembling at the prospect before her. ‘I am not a lady.’

‘And I am,’ said Magdalen, bitterly. ‘Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head. You speak good English—you are naturally quiet, and self-restrained—if you can only conquer your timidity, I have not the least fear of you. There will be time enough, in the new lodging, for you to practise your character, and for me to practise mine. There will be time enough to make some more dresses—another gown for me, and your wedding-dress (which I mean to give you) for yourself. I shall have the newspaper sent every day. When the advertisement appears I shall answer it—in any name I can take on the spur of the moment; in your name, if you like to lend it to me—and when the housekeeper asks me for my character I shall refer her to you. She will see you in the position of mistress, and me in the position of maid—no suspicion can possibly enter her mind, unless you put it there. If you only have the courage to follow my instructions, and to say what I shall tell you to

say, the interview will be over in ten minutes.'

'You frighten me, ma'am,' said Louisa, still trembling. 'You take my breath away with surprise. Courage! Where shall I find courage?'

'Where I keep it for you,' said Magdalen—'in the passage-money to Australia. Look at the new prospect which gives you a husband, and restores you to your child—and you will find your courage there.'

Louisa's sad face brightened; Louisa's faint heart beat quick. A spark of her mistress's spirit flew up into her eyes, as she thought of the golden future.

'If you accept my proposal,' pursued Magdalen, 'you can be asked in church at once, if you like. I promise you the money, on the day when the advertisement appears in the newspaper. The risk of the housekeeper's rejecting me, is my risk—not yours. My good looks are sadly gone off, I know. But I think I can still hold my place against the other servants—I think I can still *look* the parlour-maid whom Admiral Bartram wants. There is nothing for you to fear in this matter; I should not have mentioned it if there had been. The only danger, is the danger of my being discovered at St. Crux—and that falls entirely on me. By the time I am in the admiral's house, you will be married, and the ship will be taking you to your new life.'

Louisa's face, now brightening with hope, now clouding again with fear, showed plain signs of the struggle which it cost her to decide. She tried to gain time; she attempted confusedly to speak a few words of gratitude—but her mistress silenced her.

'You owe me no thanks,' said Magdalen. 'I tell you again, we are only helping each other. I have very little money, but it is enough for your purpose, and I give it you freely. I have led a wretched life; I have made others wretched about me. I can't even make *you* happy, except by tempting you to a new decieit. There! there! it's not your fault. Worse women than you are will help me, if you refuse. Decide as you like—but don't be afraid of taking the money. If I succeed, I shall not want it. If I fail———'

She stopped; rose abruptly from her chair; and hid her face from Louisa by walking away to the fireplace.

'If I fail,' she resumed, warming her foot carelessly at the fender, 'all the money in the world will be of no use to me. Never mind why—never mind Me—think of yourself. I won't take advantage of the confession you have made to me; I won't influence you against your will. Do as you yourself think best. But remember one thing—my mind is made up: nothing you can say or do. will change it.'

Her sudden removal from the table, the altered tones of her voice as she spoke the last words, appeared to renew Louisa's hesitation. She clasped her hands together in her lap, and wrung them hard. 'This has come on me very suddenly, ma'am,' said the girl. 'I am sorely tempted to say, Yes. And yet, I'm almost afraid———'

'Take the night to consider it,' interposed Magdalen, keeping her face persistently turned towards the fire; 'and tell me what you have decided to do, when you come into my room to-morrow morning. I shall want no help tonight—I can undress myself. You are not so strong as I am; you are tired, I dare say. Don't sit up on my account. Good night, Louisa, and pleasant dreams!'

Her voice sank lower and lower, as she spoke those kind words. She sighed heavily; and, leaning her arm on the mantelpiece, laid her head on it with a reckless weariness miserable to see. Louisa had not left the room, as she supposed—Louisa came softly to her side, and kissed her hand. Magdalen started; but she made no attempt, this time, to draw her hand away. The sense of her own horrible isolation subdued her, at the touch of the servant's lips. Her proud heart melted; her eyes filled with burning tears. 'Don't distress me!' she said, faintly. 'The time

for kindness has gone by; it only overpowers me now. Good-night!' When the morning came, the affirmative answer which Magdalen had anticipated, was the answer given.

On that day, the landlady received her week's notice to quit; and Louisa's needle flew fast through the stitches of the parlour-maid's dress.

the end of the sixth scene

Between the Scenes

Progress of the Story through the Post

Wilkie Collins

I. *From Miss Garth to Mr. Pendril*

‘Westmoreland House, Jan. 3rd, 1848.

‘Dear Mr Pendril,

‘I write, as you kindly requested, to report how Norah is going on, and to tell you what changes I see for the better in the state of her mind on the subject of her sister.

‘I cannot say that she is becoming resigned to Magdalen’s continued silence—I know her faithful nature too well to say it. I can only tell you that she is beginning to find relief from the heavy pressure of sorrow and suspense, in new thoughts and new hopes. I doubt if she has yet realized this in her own mind; but I see the result, although she is not conscious of it herself. I see her heart opening to the consolation of another interest and another love. She has not said a word to me on the subject—nor have I said a word to her. But as certainly as I know that Mr. George Bartram’s visits have lately grown more and more frequent to the family at Portland Place—so certainly I can assure you that Norah is finding a relief under her suspense, which is not of my bringing, and a hope in the future, which I have not taught her to feel.

‘It is needless for me to say that I tell you this, in the strictest confidence. God knows whether the happy prospect which seems to me to be just dawning, will grow brighter or not, as time goes on. The oftener I see Mr. George Bartram—and he has called on me more than once—the stronger my liking for him grows. To my poor judgment he seems to be a gentleman, in the highest and truest sense of the word. If I could live to see Norah his wife—I should almost feel that I had lived long enough. But who can discern the future? We have suffered so much that I am afraid to hope.

‘Have you heard anything of Magdalen? I don’t know why or how it is—but since I have known of her husband’s death, my old tenderness for her seems to cling to me more obstinately than ever.

‘Always yours truly,

‘Harriet Garth.’

II. *From Mr. Pendril to Miss Garth*

‘Serle Street, Jan. 4th, 1848.

‘Dear Miss Garth,

‘Of Mrs. Noel Vanstone herself I have heard nothing. But I have learnt, since I saw you, that the report of the position in which she is left by the death of her husband may be depended upon as the truth. No legacy of any kind is bequeathed to her. Her name is not once mentioned in her husband’s will.

‘Knowing what we know, it is not to be concealed that this circumstance threatens us with more embarrassment, and perhaps with more distress. Mrs. Noel Vanstone is not the woman to submit, without a desperate resistance, to the total overthrow of all her schemes and all her hopes. The mere fact that nothing whatever has been heard of her since her husband’s death, is suggestive to my mind of serious mischief to come. In her situation, and with her temper, the quieter she is now, the more inveterately I, for one, distrust her in the future. It is impossible to say to what violent measures her present extremity may not drive her. It is impossible to feel sure, that she may not be the cause of some public scandal, this time, which may affect her innocent sister as well as herself.

‘I know you will not misinterpret the motive which has led me to write these lines; I know you will not think that I am inconsiderate enough to cause you unnecessary alarm. My sincere anxiety to see that happy prospect realized to which your letter alludes, has caused me to write far less reservedly than I might otherwise have written. I strongly urge you to use your influence, on every occasion when you can fairly exert it, to strengthen that growing attachment, and to place it beyond the reach of any coming disasters, while you have the opportunity of doing so. When I tell you that the fortune of which Mrs. Noel Vanstone has been deprived, is entirely bequeathed to Admiral Bartram—and when I add that Mr. George Bartram is generally understood to be his uncle’s heir—you will, I think, acknowledge that I am not warning you without a cause.

‘Yours most truly,

‘William Pendril.’

III. *From Admiral Bartram to Mrs. Drake (housekeeper at St. Crux)*

‘St. Crux, Jan. 10th, 1848.

‘Mrs. Drake,

‘I have received your letter from London, stating that you have found me a new parlour-maid at last, and that the girl is ready to return with you to St. Crux, when your other errands in town allow you to come back.

‘This arrangement must be altered immediately, for a reason which I am heartily sorry to have to write.

‘The illness of my niece, Mrs. Girdlestone—which appeared to be so slight as to alarm none of us, doctors included—has ended fatally. I received this morning the shocking news of her death. Her husband is said to be

quite frantic with grief. Mr. George has already gone to his brother-in-law's, to superintend the last melancholy duties—and I must follow him, before the funeral takes place. We propose to take Mr. Girdlestone away afterwards, and to try the effect on him of change of place and new scenes. Under these sad circumstances, I may be absent from St. Crux a month or six weeks at least—the house will be shut up—and the new servant will not be wanted until my return.

'You will therefore tell the girl, on receiving this letter, that a death in the family has caused a temporary change in our arrangements. If she is willing to wait, you may safely engage her to come here in six weeks' time—I shall be back then, if Mr. George is not. If she refuses, pay her what compensation is right, and so have done with her.

'Yours,

'Arthur Bartram.'

IV. *From Mrs. Drake to Admiral Bartram*

'Jan. 11th.

'Honoured Sir,

'I hope to get my errands done, and to return to St. Crux tomorrow—but write to save you anxiety, in case of delay.

'The young woman whom I have engaged (Louisa by name) is willing to wait your time; and her present mistress, taking an interest in her welfare, will provide for her during the interval. She understands that she is to enter on her new service in six weeks from the present date—namely, on the twenty-fifth of February next.

'Begging you will accept my respectful sympathy under the sad bereavement which has befallen the family,

'I remain, Honoured Sir, your humble servant,

'Sophia Drake.'

The Seventh Scene

St. Crux-in-the-Marsh

Wilkie Collins

Chapter I

‘This is where you are to sleep. Put yourself tidy; and then come down again to my room. The admiral has returned, and you will have to begin by waiting on him at dinner to-day.’

With those words Mrs. Drake, the housekeeper, closed the door; and the new parlour-maid was left alone in her bed-chamber at St. Crux.

That day was the eventful twenty-fifth of February. In barely four months from the time when Mrs. Lecount had placed her master’s private Instructions in his Executor’s hands, the one combination of circumstances against which it had been her first and foremost object to provide, was exactly the combination which had now taken place. Mr. Noel Vanstone’s widow, and Admiral Bartram’s Secret Trust were together in the same house.

Thus far, events had declared themselves, without an exception, in Magdalen’s favour. Thus far, the path which had led her to St. Crux, had been a path without an obstacle. Louisa—whose name she had now taken—had sailed three days since for Australia with her husband and her child: she was the only living creature whom Magdalen had trusted with her secret, and she was by this time out of sight of the English land. The girl had been careful, reliable, and faithfully devoted to her mistress’s interests to the last. She had passed the ordeal of her interview with the housekeeper, and had forgotten none of the instructions by which she had been prepared to meet it. She had herself proposed to turn the six weeks’ delay, caused by the death in the admiral’s family, to good account, by continuing the all-important practice of those domestic lessons, on the perfect acquirement of which her mistress’s daring stratagem depended for its success. Thanks to the time thus gained, when Louisa’s marriage was over, and the day of parting had come, Magdalen had learnt and mastered, in the nicest detail, everything that her former servant could teach her. On the day when she passed the doors of St. Crux, she entered on her desperate venture, strong in the ready presence of mind under emergencies which her later life had taught her—stronger still, in the trained capacity that she possessed for the assumption of a character not her own—strongest of all, in her two months’ daily familiarity with the practical duties of the position which she had undertaken to fill.

As soon as Mrs. Drake’s departure had left her alone, she unpacked her box, and dressed herself for the evening.

She put on a lavender-coloured stuff gown—half-mourning for Mrs. Girdlestone; ordered for all the servants, under the admiral’s instructions—a white muslin apron, and a neat white cap and collar, with ribbons to match

the gown. In this servant's costume—in the plain gown fastening high round her neck, in the neat little white cap at the back of her head—in this simple dress, to the eyes of all men, not linendrapers, at once the most modest and the most alluring that a woman can wear, the sad changes which mental suffering had wrought in her beauty almost disappeared from view. In the evening costume of a lady; with her bosom uncovered, with her figure armed, rather than dressed, in unpliable silk—the admiral might have passed her by without notice in his own drawing-room. In the evening costume of a servant, no admirer of beauty could have looked at her once, and not have turned again to look at her for the second time.

Descending the stairs, on her way to the housekeeper's room, she passed by the entrances to two long stone corridors, with rows of doors opening on them; one corridor situated on the second, and one on the first floor of the house. 'Many rooms!' she thought, as she looked at the doors. 'Weary work, searching here for what I have come to find!'

On reaching the ground floor she was met by a weatherbeaten old man, who stopped and stared at her with an appearance of great interest. He was the same old man whom Captain Wragge had seen, in the back-yard at St. Crux, at work on the model of a ship. All round the neighbourhood he was known, far and wide, as 'the admiral's coxswain.'* His name was Mazey. Sixty years had written their story of hard work at sea, and hard drinking on shore, on the veteran's grim and wrinkled face. Sixty years had proved his fidelity, and had brought his battered old carcase, at the end of the voyage, into port in his master's house.

Seeing no one else of whom she could inquire, Magdalen requested the old man to show her the way that led to the housekeeper's room.

'I'll show you, my dear,' said old Mazey, speaking in the high and hollow voice peculiar to the deaf. 'You're the new maid—eh? And a fine-grown girl, too! His honour, the admiral, likes a parlour-maid with a clean run fore and aft. You'll do, my dear—you'll do.'

'You must not mind what Mr. Mazey says to you,' remarked the housekeeper, opening her door as the old sailor expressed his approval of Magdalen in these terms. 'He is privileged to talk as he pleases; and he is very tiresome and slovenly in his habits—but he means no harm.'

With that apology for the veteran, Mrs. Drake led Magdalen first to the pantry, and next to the linen-room; installing her, with all due formality, in her own domestic dominions. This ceremony completed, the new parlourmaid was taken up-stairs, and was shown the dining-room, which opened out of the corridor on the first floor. Here, she was directed to lay the cloth, and to prepare the table for one person only—Mr. George Bartram not having returned with his uncle to St. Crux. Mrs. Drake's sharp eyes watched Magdalen attentively, as she performed this introductory duty; and Mrs. Drake's private convictions, when the table was spread, forced her to acknowledge, so far, that the new servant thoroughly understood her work.

An hour later, the soup-tureen was placed on the table; and Magdalen stood alone behind the admiral's empty chair, waiting her master's first inspection of her, when he entered the dining-room.

A large bell rang in the lower regions—quick, shambling footsteps pattered on the stone corridor outside—the door opened suddenly—and a tall lean yellow old man, sharp as to his eyes, shrewd as to his lips, fussily restless as to all his movements, entered the room, with two huge Labrador dogs at his heels, and took his seat in a violent hurry. The dogs followed him, and placed themselves, with the utmost gravity and composure, one on each side of his chair. This was Admiral Bartram—and these were the companions of his solitary meal.

'Ay! ay! ay! here's the new parlour-maid to be. sure!' he began, looking sharply, but not at all unkindly, at Magdalen. 'What's your name, my good girl? Louisa, is it? I shall call you Lucy, if you don't mind. Take off the

cover, my dear—I'm a minute or two late to-day. Don't be unpunctual to-morrow on that account; I am as regular as clock-work generally. How are you after your journey? Did my spring-cart bump you about much in bringing you from the station? Capital soup this—hot as fire—reminds me of the soup we used to have in the West Indies in the year Three. Have you got your half-mourning on? Stand there, and let me see. Ah, yes, very neat, and nice, and tidy. Poor Mrs. Girdlestone! Oh, dear, dear, dear, poor Mrs. Girdlestone! You're not afraid of dogs are you, Lucy? Eh? What? You like dogs? That's right! Always be kind to dumb animals. These two dogs dine with me every day, except when there's company. The dog with the black nose is Brutus; and the dog with the white nose is Cassius. Did you ever hear who Brutus and Cassius* were? Ancient Romans? That's right —good girl. Mind your book and your needle; and we'll get you a good husband one of these days. Take away the soup, my dear, take away the soup!'

This was the man whose secret it was now the one interest of Magdalen's life to surprise! This was the man whose name had supplanted hers in Noel Vanstone's will!

The fish and the roast meat followed; and the admiral's talk rambled on—now in soliloquy, now addressed to the parlour-maid, and now directed to the dogs—as familiarly and as disconnectedly as ever. Magdalen observed with some surprise, that the companions of the admiral's dinner had, thus far, received no scraps from their master's plate. The two magnificent brutes sat squatted on their haunches, with their great heads over the table, watching the progress of the meal with the profoundest attention, but apparently expecting no share in it. The roast meat was removed, the admiral's plate was changed, and Magdalen took the silver covers off the two made-dishes* on either side of the table. As she handed the first of the savoury dishes to her master, the dogs suddenly exhibited a breathless personal interest in the proceedings. Brutus gluttonously watered at the mouth; and the tongue of Cassius, protruding in unutterable expectation, smoked again between his enormous jaws.

The admiral helped himself liberally from the dish; sent Magdalen to the side-table to get him some bread; and, when he thought her eye was off him, furtively tumbled the whole contents of his plate into Brutus's mouth. Cassius whined faintly as his fortunate comrade swallowed the savoury mess at a gulp. 'Hush! you fool,' whispered the admiral. 'Your turn next!'

Magdalen presented the second dish. Once more, the old gentleman helped himself largely—once more he sent her away to the side-table—once more, he tumbled the entire contents of the plate down the dog's throat; selecting Cassius, this time, as became a considerate master and an impartial man. When the next course followed—consisting of a plain pudding and an unwholesome 'cream'—Magdalen's suspicion of the function of the dogs at the dinner-table was confirmed. While the master took the simple pudding, the dogs swallowed the elaborate cream. The admiral was plainly afraid of offending his cook on the one hand, and of offending his digestion on the other—and Brutus and Cassius were the two trained accomplices who regularly helped him every day off the horns of his dilemma. 'Very good! very good!' said the old gendeman, with the most transparent duplicity. 'Tell the cook, my dear, a capital cream!'

Having placed the wine and dessert on the table, Magdalen was about to withdraw. Before she could leave the room, her master called her back.

'Stop, stop!' said the admiral. 'You don't know the ways of the house yet, Lucy. Put another wine-glass here, at my right hand—the largest you can find, my dear. I've got a third dog, who comes in at dessert—a drunken old sea-dog who has followed my fortunes afloat and ashore, for fifty years, and more. Yes, yes; that's the sort of glass we want. You're a good girl—you're a neat, handy girl. Steady, my dear! there's nothing to be frightened at!'

A sudden thump on the outside of the door, followed by one mighty bark from each of the dogs, had made

Magdalen start. ‘Come in!’ shouted the admiral. The door opened; the tails of Brutus and Cassius cheerfully thumped the floor; and old Mazey marched straight up to the right-hand side of his master’s chair. The veteran stood there, with his legs wide apart and his balance carefully adjusted, as if the dining-room had been a cabin, and the house a ship, pitching in a sea-way.

The admiral filled the large glass with port, filled his own glass with claret, and raised it to his lips.

‘God bless the Queen, Mazey,’ said the admiral.

‘God bless the Queen, your honour,’ said old Mazey, swallowing his port, as the dogs swallowed the made-dishes, at a gulp.

‘How’s the wind, Mazey?’

‘West and by Noathe, your honour.’

‘Any report to-night, Mazey?’

‘No report, your honour.’

‘Good evening, Mazey.’

‘Good evening, your honour.’

The after-dinner ceremony thus completed, old Mazey made his bow, and walked out of the room again. Brutus and Cassius stretched themselves on the rug to digest mushrooms and made gravies in the lubricating heat of the fire. ‘For what we have received, the Lord make us truly thankful,’ said the admiral. ‘Go down-stairs, my good girl, and get your supper. A light meal, Lucy, if you take my advice—a light meal or you will have the nightmare. Early to bed, my dear, and early to rise, makes a parlour-maid healthy and wealthy and wise. That’s the wisdom of your ancestors—you mustn’t laugh at it. Good night.’ In those words Magdalen was dismissed; and so her first day’s experience of Admiral Bartram came to an end.

After breakfast, the next morning, the admiral’s directions to the new parlour-maid, included among them one particular order which, in Magdalen’s situation, it was especially her interest to receive. In the old gendeman’s absence from home that day, on local business which took him to Ossory, she was directed to make herself acquainted with the whole inhabited quarter of the house, and to learn the positions of the various rooms, so as to know where the bells called her when the bells rang. Mrs. Drake was charged with the duty of superintending the voyage of domestic discovery, unless she happened to be otherwise engaged—in which case, any one of the inferior servants would be equally competent to act as Magdalen’s guide.

At noon the admiral left for Ossory, and Magdalen presented herself in Mrs. Drake’s room, to be shown over the house. Mrs. Drake happened to be otherwise engaged; and referred her to the head housemaid. The head housemaid happened on that particular morning to be in the same condition as Mrs. Drake; and referred her to the under-housemaids. The under-housemaids declared they were all behindhand and had not a minute to spare —they suggested, not too civilly, that old Mazey had nothing on earth to do, and that he knew the house as well, or better than he knew his A B C. Magdalen took the hint, with a secret indignation and contempt which it cost her a hard struggle to conceal. She had suspected, on the previous night, and she was certain now, that the women-servants all incomprehensibly resented her presence among them, with the same sullen unanimity of distrust. Mrs. Drake, as she had seen for herself, was really engaged that morning over her accounts. But of all the servants under her who had made their excuses, not one had even affected to be more occupied than usual. Their looks said plainly, ‘We don’t like you; and we won’t show you over the house.’

She found her way to old Mazey, not by the scanty directions given her, but by the sound of the veteran's cracked and quavering voice, singing in some distant seclusion, a verse of the immortal sea-song—'Tom Bowling.'Just as she stopped among the rambling stone passages on the basement story of the house, uncertain which way to turn next, she heard the tuneless old voice in the distance, singing these lines:

'His form was of the manliest beau-u-u-uty,
His heart was ki-i-ind and soft;
Faithful below Tom did his duty,
But now he's gone alo-o-o-o-oft—
But now he's go-o-o-one aloft!'

Magdalen followed in the direction of the quavering voice, and found herself in a little room, looking out on the back yard. There sat old Mazey, with his spectacles low on his nose, and his knotty old hands blundering over the rigging of his model ship. There were Brutus and Cassius digesting before the fire again, and snoring as if they thoroughly enjoyed it. There was Lord Nelson on one wall, in flaming water-colours; and there on the other was a portrait of Admiral Bartram's last flag-ship, in full sail on a sea of slate, with a salmon-coloured sky to complete the illusion.

'What, they won't show you over the house—won't they?' said old Mazey. 'I will, then! That head housemaid's a sour one, my dear—if ever there was a sour one yet. You're too young and good-looking to please 'em—that's what you are.' He rose, took off his spectacles, and feebly mended the fire. 'She's as straight as a poplar,' said old Mazey, considering Magdalen's figure in drowsy soliloquy. 'I say she's as straight as a poplar; and his honour the admiral says so too! Come along, my dear,' he proceeded, addressing himself to Magdalen again. 'I'll teach you your Pints of the Compass first. When you know your Pints, blow high, blow low, you'll find it plain sailing all over the house.'

He led the way to the door—stopped, and suddenly bethinking himself of his miniature ship, went back to put his model away in an empty cupboard—led the way to the door again—stopped once more—remembered that some of the rooms were chilly—and pottered about, swearing and grumbling, and looking for his hat. Magdalen sat down patiently to wait for him. She gratefully contrasted his treatment of her with the treatment she had received from the women. Resist it as firmly, despise it as proudly as we may, all studied unkindness—no matter how contemptible it may be—has a stinging power in it which reaches to the quick. Magdalen only knew how she had felt the small malice of the female servants, by the effect which the rough kindness of the old sailor produced on her afterwards. The dumb welcome of the dogs, when the movements in the room had roused them from their sleep, touched her more acutely still. Brutus pushed his mighty muzzle companionably into her hand; and Cassius laid his friendly fore-paw on her lap. Her heart yearned over the two creatures as she patted and caressed them. It seemed only yesterday since she and the dogs at Combe-Raven had roamed the garden together, and had idled away the summer mornings luxuriously on the shady lawn.

Old Mazey found his hat at last; and they started on their exploring expedition, with the dogs after them.

Leaving the basement story of the house, which was entirely devoted to the servants' offices, they ascended to the first floor, and entered the long corridor, with which Magdalen's last night's experience had already made her acquainted. 'Put your back agin this wall,' said old Mazey, pointing to the long wall—pierced at irregular intervals with windows looking out over a court-yard and fish-pond—which formed the right-hand side of the corridor, as Magdalen now stood. 'Put your back here,' said the veteran; 'and look straight afore you. What do you see?'—'The opposite wall of the passage,' said Magdalen.—'Ay! ay! what else?'—'The doors leading into the rooms.'—'What else?'—'I see nothing else.' Old Mazey chuckled, winked, and shook his knotty forefinger at Magdalen impressively. 'You see one of the Pints of the Compass, my dear. When you've got your back agin

this wall, and when you look straight afore you—you look Noathe. If you ever get lost hereaway, put your back agin the wall, look out straight afore you, and say to yourself, "I look Noathe!" You do that like a good girl, and you won't lose your bearings.'

After administering this preliminary dose of instruction, old Mazey opened the first of the doors on the left-hand side of the passage. It led into the dining-room, with which Magdalen was already familiar. The second room was fitted up as a library; and the third, as a morning-room. The fourth and fifth doors—both belonging to dismanded and uninhabited rooms, and both locked—brought them to the end of the North wing of the house, and to the opening of a second and shorter passage, placed at a right angle to the first. Here old Mazey, who had divided his time pretty equally, during the investigation of the rooms in talking of 'his honour the Admiral,' and whistling to the dogs—returned with all possible expedition to the points of the compass; and gravely directed Magdalen to repeat the ceremony of putting her back against the wall. She attempted to shorten the proceedings, by declaring (quite correctly) that in her present position she knew she was looking East. 'Don't you talk about the East, my dear,' said old Mazey, proceeding unmoved with his own system of instruction, 'till you know the East first. Put your back agin this wall, and look straight afore you. What do you see?' The remainder of the catechism proceeded as before. When the end was reached, Magdalen's instructor was satisfied. He chuckled and winked at her once more. 'Now you may talk about the East, my dear,' said the veteran, 'for now you know it.'

The East passage, after leading them on for a few yards only, terminated in a vestibule, with a high door in it which faced them as they advanced. The door admitted them to a large and lofty drawing-room, decorated, like all the other apartments, with valuable old-fashioned furniture. Leading the way across this room, Magdalen's conductor pushed back a heavy sliding door, opposite the door of entrance. 'Put your apron over your head,' said old Mazey. 'We tire coming to the Banketing Hall, now. The floor's mortal cold, and the damp sticks to the place like cockroaches to a collier. His honour the admiral calls it the Arctic Passage. I've got my name for it, too. I call it, Freeze-your-Bones.'

Magdalen passed through the doorway, and found herself in the ancient Banqueting-Hall of St. Crux.

On her left hand, she saw a row of lofty windows, set deep in embrasures, and extending over a frontage of more than a hundred feet in length. On her right hand, ranged in one long row from end to end of the opposite wall, hung a dismal collection of black begrimed old pictures, rotting from their frames, and representing battle-scenes by sea and land. Below the pictures, midway down the length of the wall, yawned a huge cavern of a fireplace, surmounted by a towering mantelpiece of black marble. The one object of furniture (if furniture it might be called) visible far or near in the vast emptiness of the place, was a gaunt ancient tripod of curiously chased metal, standing lonely in the middle of the hall, and supporting a wide circular pan, filled deep with ashes from an extinct charcoal fire. The high ceiling, once finely carved and gilt, was foul with dirt and cobwebs; the naked walls at either end of the room were stained with damp; and the cold of the marble floor struck through the narrow strip of matting laid down, parallel with the windows, as a footpath for passengers across the wilderness of the room. No better name for it could have been devised than the name which old Mazey had found. 'Freeze-your-Bones' accurately described in three words, the Banqueting-Hall at St. Crux.

'Do you never light a fire in this dismal place?' asked Magdalen.

'It all depends on which side of Freeze-your-Bones his honour the admiral lives,' said old Mazey. 'His honour likes to shift his quarters, sometimes to one side of the house, sometimes to the other. If he lives Noathe of Freeze-your-Bones—which is where you've just come from—we don't waste our coals here. If he lives South of Freeze-your-Bones—which is where we are going to next—we light the fire in the grate and the charcoal in the pan. Every night, when we do that, the damp gets the better of us: every morning, we turn to again, and get

the better of the damp.'

With this remarkable explanation, old Mazey led the way to the lower end of the Hall, opened more doors, and showed Magdalen through another suite of rooms, four in number; all of moderate size, and all furnished in much the same manner as the rooms in the northern wing. She looked out of the windows, and saw the neglected gardens of St. Crux, overgrown with brambles and weeds. Here and there, at no great distance in the grounds, the smoothly curving line of one of the tidal streams peculiar to the locality, wound its way, gleaming in the sunlight, through gaps in the brambles and trees. The more distant view ranged over the flat eastward country beyond, speckled with its scattered litde villages; crossed and re-crossed by its network of 'backwaters;' and terminated abruptly by the long straight line of sea-wall which protects the defenceless coast of Essex from invasion by the sea.

'Have we more rooms still to see?' asked Magdalen, turning from the view of the garden, and looking about her for another door.

'No more, my dear—we've run aground here, and we may as well wear round and put back again,' said old Mazey. 'There's another side to the house—due south of you as you stand now—which is all tumbling about our ears. You must go out into the garden, if you want to see it; it's built off from us by a brick bulkhead, t'other side of this wall here. The monks lived due south of us, my dear, hundreds of years afore his honour the admiral was bom or thought of; and a fine time of it they had, as I've heard. They sang in the church all the morning, and drank grog in the orchard all the afternoon. They slept off their grog on the best of featherbeds; and they fattened on the neighbourhood all the year round. Lucky beggars! lucky beggars!'

Apostrophizing the monks in these terms, and evidently regretting that he had not lived himself in those good old times, the veteran led the way back through the rooms. On the return passage across 'Freeze-your-Bones,' Magdalen preceded him. 'She's as straight as a poplar,' mumbled old Mazey to himself, hobbling along after his youthful companion, and wagging his venerable head in cordial approval. 'I never was particular what nation they belonged to—but I always *did* like 'em straight and fine grown, and I always *shall* like 'em straight and fine grown, to my dying day.'

'Are there more rooms to see up-stairs, on the second floor?' asked Magdalen, when they had returned to the point from which they had started.

The naturally clear distinct tones of her voice, had hitherto reached the old sailor's imperfect sense of hearing easily enough. Rather to her surprise, he became stone-deaf, on a sudden, to her last question.

'Are you sure of your Pints of the Compass?' he inquired. 'If you're not sure, put your back agin die wall, and we'll go all over 'em again, my dear, beginning with the Noathe.'

Magdalen assured him that she felt quite familiar, by this time, with all the points, the 'Noathe' included—and then repeated her question in louder tones. The veteran obstinately matched her, by becoming deafer than ever.

'Yes, my dear,' he said; 'you're right; it *is* chilly in these passages; and unless I go back to my fire, my fire'll go out—won't it? If you don't feel sure of your Pints of the Compass, come into me, and I'll put you right again.' He winked benevolently, whisded to the dogs, and hobbled off. Magdalen heard him chuckle over his own success in balking her curiosity on the subject of the second floor. 'I know how to deal with 'em!' said old Mazey to himself, in high triumph. 'Tall and short, native and foreign, sweethearts and wives—*I* know how to deal with 'em!'

Left by herself, Magdalen exemplified the excellence of the old sailor's method of treatment, in her particular

case, by ascending the stairs immediately, to make her own observations on the second floor. The stone passage here was exactly similar—except that more doors opened out of it—to the passage on the first floor. She opened the two nearest doors, one after another, at a venture, and discovered that both rooms were bed-chambers. The fear of being discovered by one of the women-servants, in a part of the house with which she had no concern, warned her not to push her investigations on the bed-room floor, too far at starting. She hurriedly walked down the passage to see where it ended; discovered that it came to its termination in a lumber-room, answering to the position of the vestibule down stairs; and retraced her steps immediately.

On her way back, she noticed an object which had previously escaped her attention. It was a low truckle-bed, placed parallel with the wall, and close to one of the doors, on the bedroom side. In spite of its strange and comfortless situation, the bed was apparently occupied at night, by a sleeper: the sheets were on it, and the end of a thick red fisherman's cap, peeped out from under the pillow. She ventured on opening the door near which the bed was placed; and found herself, as she conjectured from certain signs and tokens, in the admiral's sleeping chamber. A moment's observation of the room was all she dared risk; and, softly closing the door again, she returned to the kitchen regions.

The truckle-bed, and the strange position in which it was placed, dwelt on her mind all through the afternoon. Who could possibly sleep in it? The remembrance of the red fisherman's cap, and the knowledge she had already gained of Mazey's dog-like fidelity to his master, helped her to guess that the old sailor might be the occupant of the truckle-bed. But why, with bedrooms enough and to spare, should he occupy that cold and comfortless situation at night? Why should he sleep on guard outside his master's door? Was there some nocturnal danger in the house, of which the admiral was afraid? The question seemed absurd—and yet the position of the bed forced it irresistibly on her mind.

Stimulated by her own ungovernable curiosity on this subject, Magdalen ventured to question the housekeeper. She acknowledged having walked from end to end of the passage on the second floor, to see if it was as long as the passage on the first; and she mentioned having noticed with astonishment the position of the truckle-bed. Mrs. Drake answered her implied inquiry shortly and sharply. 'I don't blame a young girl like you,' said the old lady, 'for being a little curious, when she first comes into such a strange house as this. But remember, for the future, that your business does not lie on the bedroom story. Mr. Mazey sleeps on that bed you noticed. It is his habit at night, to sleep outside his master's door.' With that meagre explanation Mrs. Drake's lips closed, and opened no more.

Later in the day, Magdalen found an opportunity of applying to old Mazey himself. She discovered the veteran in high good humour, smoking his pipe, and warming a tin mug of ale at his own snug fire.

'Mr. Mazey,' she asked boldly, 'why do you put your bed in that cold passage?'

'What! you have been up-stairs, you young jade, have you?' said old Mazey, looking up from his mug with a leer.

Magdalen smiled and nodded. 'Come! come! tell me,' she said, coaxingly. 'Why do you sleep outside the admiral's door?'

'Why do you part your hair in the middle, my dear?' asked old Mazey, with another leer.

'I suppose, because I am accustomed to do it,' answered Magdalen.

'Ay! ay!' said the veteran. 'That's why, is it? Well, my dear, the reason why you part your hair in the middle, is the reason why I sleep outside the admiral's door. I know how to deal with 'em!' chuckled old Mazey, lapsing

into soliloquy, and stirring up his ale in high triumph. ‘Tall and short, native and foreign, sweethearts and wives —*I* know how to deal with ’em!’

Magdalen’s third, and last, attempt at solving the mystery of the truckle-bed, was made while she was waiting on the admiral at dinner. The old gentleman’s questions gave her an opportunity of referring to the subject, without any appearance of presumption or disrespect—but he proved to be quite as impenetrable, in his way, as old Mazey and Mrs. Drake had been in theirs. ‘It doesn’t concern you, my dear,’ said the admiral, bluntly. ‘Don’t be curious. Look in your Old Testament when you go down-stairs, and see what happened in the Garden of Eden through curiosity. Be a good girl—and don’t imitate your mother Eve.’

Late at night, as Magdalen passed the end of the second-floor passage, proceeding alone on her way up to her own room, she stopped and listened. A screen was placed at the entrance of the corridor, so as to hide it from the view of persons passing on the stairs. The snoring she heard on the other side of the screen, encouraged her to slip round it, and to advance a few steps. Shading the light of her candle with her hand, she ventured close to the admiral’s door, and saw to her surprise that the bed had been moved, since she had seen it in the daytime, so as to stand exactly across the door, and to bar the way entirely to any one who might attempt to enter the admiral’s room. After this discovery, old Mazey himself, snoring lustily, with the red fisherman’s cap pulled down to his eyebrows, and the blankets drawn up to his nose—became an object of secondary importance only, by comparison with his bed. That the veteran did actually sleep on guard before his master’s door—and that he and the admiral and the housekeeper were in the secret of this unaccountable proceeding—was now beyond all doubt.

‘A strange end,’ thought Magdalen, pondering over her discovery as she stole up-stairs to her own sleeping-room—‘a strange end to a strange day!’

Chapter II

The first week passed, the second week passed, and Magdalen was, to all appearance, no nearer to the discovery of the Secret Trust, than on the day when she first entered on her service at St. Crux.

But the fortnight, uneventful though it was, had not been a fortnight lost. Experience had already satisfied her on one important point—experience had shown that she could set the rooted distrust of the other servants safely at defiance. Time had accustomed the women to her presence in the house, without shaking the vague conviction which possessed them all alike, that the new comer was not one of themselves. All that Magdalen could do, in her own defence, was to keep the instinctive female suspicion of her, confined within those purely negative limits which it had occupied from the first—and this she accomplished.

Day after day, the women watched her, with the untiring vigilance of malice and distrust; and day after day, not the vestige of a discovery rewarded them for their pains. Silently, intelligently, and industriously—with an ever-present remembrance of herself and her place—the new parlourmaid did her work. Her only intervals of rest and relaxation were the intervals passed occasionally, in the day, with old Mazey and the dogs, and the precious interval of the night, during which she was secure from observation in the solitude of her room. Thanks to the superfluity of bedchambers at St. Crux, each one of the servants had the choice, if she pleased, of sleeping in a room of her own. Alone in the night, Magdalen might dare to be herself again—might dream of the past, and wake from the dream, encountering no curious eyes to notice that she was in tears—might ponder over the future, and be roused by no whispering in comers, which tainted her with the suspicion of ‘having something on

her mind.'

Satisfied, thus far, of the perfect security of her position in the house, she profited next by a second chance in her favour, which—before the fortnight was at an end—relieved her mind of all doubt on the formidable subject of Mrs. Lecount.

Partly from the accidental gossip of the women, at the table in the servants' hall—partly from a marked paragraph in a Swiss newspaper, which she had found one morning lying open on the admiral's easy-chair—she gained the welcome assurance that no danger was to be dreaded, this time, from the housekeeper's presence on the scene. Mrs. Lecount had, as it appeared, passed a week or more at St. Crux, after the date of her master's death, and had then left England, to live on the interest of her legacy, in honourable and prosperous retirement, in her native place. The paragraph in the Swiss newspaper described the fulfilment of this laudable project. Mrs. Lecount had not only established herself at Zurich, but (wisely mindful of the uncertainty of life) had also settled the charitable uses to which her fortune was to be applied after her death. One half of it was to go to the founding of a 'Lecompte Scholarship,' for poor students, in the University of Geneva. The other half was to be employed by the municipal authorities of Zurich, in the maintenance and education of a certain number of orphan girls, natives of the city, who were to be trained for domestic service in later life. The Swiss journalist adverted to these philanthropic bequests in terms of extravagant eulogy. Zurich was congratulated on the possession of a Paragon of public virtue; and William Tell, in the character of benefactor to Switzerland, was compared disadvantageously with Mrs. Lecount.

The third week began; and Magdalen was now at liberty to take her first step forward on the way to the discovery of the Secret Trust.

She ascertained, from old Mazey, that it was his master's custom, during the winter and spring months, to occupy the rooms in the north wing; and during the summer and autumn, to cross the Arctic passage of 'Freeze-your-Bones,' and live in the eastward apartments which looked out on the garden. While the Banqueting-Hall remained—owing to the admiral's inadequate pecuniary resources—in its damp and dismantled state, and while the interior of St. Crux was thus comfortlessly divided into two separate residences, no more convenient arrangement than this could well have been devised. Now and then (as Magdalen understood from her informant) there were days, both in winter and summer, when the admiral became anxious about the condition of the rooms which he was not occupying at the time; and when he insisted on investigating the state of the furniture, the pictures, and the books with his own eyes. On these occasions—in summer as in winter—a blazing fire was kindled for some days previously, in the large grate, and the charcoal was lit in the tripod pan, to keep the Banqueting-Hall as warm as circumstances would admit. As soon as the old gentleman's anxieties were set at rest, the rooms were shut up again; and 'Freeze-your-Bones' was once more abandoned for weeks and weeks together to damp, desolation, and decay. The last of these temporary migrations had taken place only a few days since; the admiral had satisfied himself that the rooms in the east wing were none the worse for the absence of their master—and he might now be safely reckoned on as settled in the north wing for weeks, and perhaps, if the season was cold, for months to come.

Trifling as they might be in themselves, these particulars were of serious importance to Magdalen—for they helped her to fix the limits of the field of search. Assuming that the admiral was likely to keep all his important documents within easy reach of his own hand, she might now feel certain that the Secret Trust was secured in one or other of the rooms in the north wing.

In which room? That question was not easy to answer.

Of the four inhabitable rooms which were all at the admiral's disposal during the day—that is to say, of the

diningroom, the library, the morning-room, and the drawing-room opening out of the vestibule—the library appeared to be the apartment in which, if he had a preference, he passed the greater part of his time. There was a table in this room, with drawers that locked; there was a magnificent Italian cabinet with doors that locked; there were five cupboards under the bookcases, every one of which locked. There were receptacles similarly secured, in the other rooms; and in all or any of these, papers might be kept.

She had answered the bell, and had seen him locking and unlocking, now in one room now in another—but oftenest in the library. She had noticed occasionally that his expression was fretful and impatient, when he looked round at her from an open cabinet or cupboard, and gave his orders; and she inferred that something in connection with his papers and possessions—it might, or might not, be the Secret Trust—irritated and annoyed him from time to time. She had heard him, more than once, lock something up in one of the rooms—come out, and go into another room—wait there a few minutes—then return to the first room, with his keys in his hand—and sharply turn the locks, and turn them again. This fidgety anxiety about his keys and his cupboards might be the result of the inbred restlessness of his disposition, aggravated in a naturally active man, by the aimless indolence of a life in retirement—a life drifting backwards and forwards among trifles, with no regular employment to steady it at any given hour of the day. On the other hand, it was just as probable that these comings and goings, these lockings and unlockings, might be attributable to the existence of some private responsibility, which had unexpectedly intruded itself into the old man's easy existence, and which tormented him with a sense of oppression, new to the experience of his later years. Either one of these interpretations might explain his conduct as reasonably and as probably as the other. Which was the right interpretation of the two, it was, in Magdalen's position, impossible to say.

The one certain discovery at which she arrived, was made in her first day's observation of him. The admiral was a rigidly careful man with his keys.

All the smaller keys he kept on a ring, in the breast-pocket of his coat. The larger, he locked up together; generally, but not always, in one of the drawers of the library table. Sometimes, he left them secured in this way at night; sometimes, he took them up to the bed-room with him in a litde basket. He had no regular times for leaving them, or for taking them away with him; he had no discoverable reason for now securing them in the library-table drawer, and now again locking them up in some other place. The inveterate wilfulness and caprice of his proceedings, in these particulars, defied every effort to reduce them to a system, and baffled all attempts at calculating on them beforehand.

The hope of gaining positive information to act on, by laying artful snares for Itim which he might fall into in his talk, proved, from the outset, to be utterly futile.

In Magdalen's situation, all experiments of this sort would have been in the last degree difficult and dangerous, with any man. With the admiral, they were simply impossible. His tendency to veer about from one subject to another; his habit of keeping his tongue perpetually going, so long as there was anybody, no matter whom, within reach of the sound of his voice; his corniced want of all dignity and reserve with his servants, promised, in appearance, much; and performed, in reality—nothing. No matter how diffidently, or how respectfully, Magdalen might presume on her master's example, and on her master's evident liking for her—the old man instantly discovered the advance she was making from her proper position, and instantly put her back in it again, with a quaint good humour which inflicted no pain, but with a blunt straightforwardness of purpose which permitted no escape. Contradictory as it may sound, Admiral Bartram was too familiar to be approached; he kept the distance between himself and his servant more effectually than if he had been the proudest man in England. The systematic reserve of a superior towards an inferior, may be occasionally overcome—the systematic familiarity, never.

Slowly the time dragged on. The fourth week came; and Magdalen had made no new discoveries. The prospect was depressing in the last degree. Even in the apparently hopeless event of her devising a means of getting at the admiral's keys, she could not count on retaining possession of them unsuspected more than a few hours—hours which might be utterly wasted through her not knowing in what direction to begin the search. The Trust might be locked up in any one of some twenty receptacles for papers, situated in four different rooms. And which room was the likeliest to look in, which receptacle was the most promising to begin with, which position among other heaps of papers the one paper needful might be expected to occupy, was more than she could say. Hemmed in by immeasurable uncertainties on every side—condemned, as it were, to wander blindfold on the very brink of success—she waited for the chance that never came, for the event that never happened, with a patience which was sinking already into the patience of despair.

Night after night, she looked back over the vanished days—and not an event rose on her memory to distinguish them one from the other. The only interruptions to the weary uniformity of the life at St. Crux, were caused by the characteristic delinquencies of old Mazey and the dogs.

At certain intervals, the original wildness broke out in the natures of Brutus and Cassius. The modest comforts of home, the savoury charms of made-dishes, the decorous joy of digestions accomplished on hearthrugs, lost all their attractions; and the dogs ungratefully left the house, to seek dissipation and adventure in the outer world. On these occasions, the established after-dinner formula of question and answer between old Mazey and his master, varied a little in one particular. 'God bless the Queen, Mazey,' and 'How's the wind, Mazey?' were followed by a new inquiry: 'Where are the dogs, Mazey?' 'Out on the loose, your honour, and be damned to 'em,' was the veteran's unvarying answer. The admiral always sighed and shook his head gravely at the news, as if Brutus and Cassius had been sons of his own, who treated him with a want of proper filial respect. In two or three days' time, the dogs always returned, lean, dirty, and heartily ashamed of themselves. For the whole of the next day they were invariably tied up in disgrace. On the day after, they were scrubbed clean, and were formally readmitted to the dining-room. There, Civilization, acting through the subtle medium of the Saucepan, recovered its hold on them; and the admiral's two prodigal sons, when they saw the covers removed, watered at the mouth as copiously as ever.

Old Mazey, in his way, proved to be just as disreputably inclined on certain occasions as the dogs. At intervals, the original wildness in *his* nature broke out: he, too, lost all relish for the comforts of home, and ungratefully left the house. He usually disappeared in the afternoon, and returned at night as drunk as liquor could make him. He was by many degrees too seasoned a vessel to meet with any disasters, on these occasions. His wicked old legs might take roundabout methods of progression, but they never failed him; his wicked old eyes might see double, but they always showed him the way home. Try as hard as they might, the servants could never succeed in persuading him that he was drunk: he always scorned the imputation. He even declined to admit the idea privately into his mind, until he had first tested his condition by an infallible criterion of his own.

It was his habit in these cases of Bacchanalian emergency, to stagger obstinately into his room on the ground floor—to take the model ship out of the cupboard—and to try if he could proceed with the never-to-be-completed employment of setting up the rigging. When he had smashed the tiny spars, and snapped asunder the delicate ropes—then, and not till then, the veteran admitted facts as they were, on the authority of practical evidence. 'Ay! ay!' he used to say confidentially to himself. 'The women are right. Drunk again, Mazey—drunk again!' Having reached this discovery, it was his habit to wait cunningly in the lower regions, until the admiral was safe in his room; and then to ascend in discreet list slippers,* to his post. Too wary to attempt getting into the truckle-bed (which would have been only inviting the catastrophe of a fall against his master's door), he always walked himself sober, up and down the passage. More than once, Magdalen had peeped round the screen, and had seen the old sailor unsteadily keeping his watch, and fancying himself once more at his duty on

board ship. ‘This is an uncommonly lively vessel in a seaway,’ he used to mutter under his breath, when his legs took him down the passage in zigzag directions, or left him for the moment, studying the ‘Pints of the Compass,’ on his own system, with his back against the wall. ‘A nasty night, mind you,’ he would maunder on, taking another turn. ‘As dark as your pocket, and the wind heading us again from the old quarter.’ On the next day, old Mazey, like the dogs, was kept downstairs in disgrace. On the day after, like the dogs again, he was reinstated in his privileges; and another change was introduced in the after-dinner formula. On entering the room, the old sailor stopped short, and made his excuses, in this brief, yet comprehensive form of words, with his back against the door:—‘Please your honour, I’m ashamed of myself,’ So the apology began and ended. ‘This mustn’t happen again, Mazey,’ the admiral used to answer. ‘It sha’n’t happen again, your honour.’ ‘Very good. Come here, and drink your glass of wine. God bless the Queen, Mazey.’—The veteran tossed off his port, and the dialogue ended as usual.

So the days passed, with no incidents more important than these to relieve their monotony, until the end of the fourth week was at hand.

On the last day, an event happened; on the last day, the long-deferred promise of the future unexpectedly began to dawn. While Magdalen was spreading the cloth in the dining-room, as usual, Mrs. Drake looked in, and instructed her on this occasion, for the first time, to lay the table for two persons. The admiral had received a letter from his nephew. Early that evening, Mr. George Bartram was expected to return to St. Crux.

Chapter III

After placing the second cover, Magdalen awaited the ringing of the dinner-bell, with an interest and impatience, which she found it no easy task to conceal. The return of Mr. Bartram would, in all probability, produce a change in the life of the house—and from change of any kind, no matter how trifling, something might be hoped. The nephew might be accessible to influences which had failed to reach the uncle. In any case, the two would talk of their affairs, over their dinner; and through that talk—proceeding day after day, in her presence—the way to discovery, now absolutely invisible, might, sooner or later, show itself.

At last, the bell rang; the door opened; and the two gendemen entered the room together.

Magdalen was struck, as her sister had been struck, by George Bartram’s resemblance to her father—judging by the portrait at Combe-Raven, which presented the likeness of Andrew Vanstone in his younger days. The light hair and florid complexion, the bright blue eyes and hardy upright figure, familiar to her in the picture, were all recalled to her memory, as the nephew followed the uncle across the room, and took his place at table. She was not prepared for this sudden revival of the lost associations of home. Her attention wandered as she tried to conceal its effect on her; and she made a blunder in waiting at table, for the first time since she had entered the house.

A quaint reprimand from the admiral, half in jest, half in earnest, gave her time to recover herself. She ventured another look at George Bartram. The impression which he produced on her, this time, roused her curiosity immediately. His face and manner plainly expressed anxiety and preoccupation of mind. He looked oftener at his plate than at his uncle—and at Magdalen herself (except one passing inspection of the new parlour-maid, when the admiral spoke to her) he never looked at all. Some uncertainty was evidently troubling his thoughts; some oppression was weighing on his natural freedom of manner. What uncertainty? what oppression? Would any personal revelations come out, little by litde, in the course of conversation at the dinner-table?

No. One set of dishes followed another set of dishes—and nothing in the shape of a personal revelation took place. The conversation halted on irregularly, between public affairs on one side and trifling private topics on the other. Politics, home and foreign, took their turn with the small household history of St. Crux: the leaders of the revolution which expelled Louis Philippe from the throne of France,* marched side by side, in the dinner-table review, with old Mazey and the dogs. The dessert was put on the table—the old sailor came in—drank his loyal toast—paid his respects to 'Master George'—and went out again. Magdalen followed him, on her way back to the servants' offices, having heard nothing in the conversation of the slightest importance to the furtherance of her own design, from the first word of it to the last. She struggled hard not to lose heart and hope on the first day. They could hardly talk again tomorrow, they could hardly talk again the next day, of the French Revolution and the dogs. Time might do wonders yet; and time was all her own.

Left together over their wine, the uncle and nephew drew their easy-chairs on either side of the fire; and, in Magdalen's absence, began the very conversation which it was Magdalen's interest to hear.

'Claret, George?' said the admiral, pushing the bottle across the table. 'You look out of spirits.'

'I am a little anxious, sir,' replied George, leaving his glass empty, and looking straight into the fire.

'I am glad to hear it,' rejoined the admiral. I am more than a litde anxious myself, I can tell you. Here we are at the last days of March—and nothing done! Your time comes to an end on the third of May; and there you sit, as if you had years still before you to turn round in.'

George smiled, and resignedly helped himself to some wine.

'Am I really to understand, sir,' he asked, 'that you are serious in what you said to me last November? Are you actually resolved to bind me to that incomprehensible condition?'

'I don't call it incomprehensible,' said the admiral, irritably.

'Don't you, sir? I am to inherit your estate, unconditionally—as you have generously settled it from the first. But I am not to touch a farthing of the fortune poor Noel left you, unless I am married within a certain time. The house and lands are to be mine (thanks to your kindness), under any circumstances. But the money with which I might improve them both, is to be arbitrarily taken away from me, if I am not a married man on the third of May. I am sadly wanting in intelligence, I dare say—but a more incomprehensible proceeding I never heard of!'

'No snapping and snarling, George! Say your say out. We don't understand sneering in Her Majesty's Navy!'

'I mean no offence, sir. But I think it's a little hard to astonish me by a change of proceeding on your part, entirely foreign to my experience of your character—and then, when I naturally ask for an explanation, to turn round coolly, and leave me in the dark. If you and Noel came to some private arrangement together, before he made his will—why not tell me? Why set up a mystery between us, where no mystery need be?'

'I won't have it, George!' cried the admiral, angrily drumming on the table with the nut-crackers. 'You are trying to draw me like a badger—but I won't be drawn! I'll make any conditions I please; and I'll be accountable to nobody for them, unless I like. It's quite bad enough to have worries and responsibilities laid on my unlucky shoulders that I never bargained for—never mind what worries: they're not yours, they're mine—without being questioned and cross-questioned as if I was a witness in a box. Here's a pretty fellow!' continued the admiral, apostrophizing his nephew in red-hot irritation, and addressing himself to the dogs on the hearth-rug for want of a better audience. 'Here's a pretty fellow! He is asked to help himself to two uncommonly comfortable things in their way—a fortune and a wife—he is allowed six months to get the wife in (we should

have got her, in the Navy, bag and baggage, in six days)—he has a round dozen of nice girls, to my certain knowledge, in one part of the country and another, all at his disposal to choose from—and what does he do? He sits month after month, with his lazy legs crossed before him; he leaves the girls to pine on the stem; and he bothers his uncle to know the reason why! I pity the poor unfortunate women. Men were made of flesh and blood—and plenty of it, too—in my time. They're made of machinery now.'

'I can only repeat, sir, I am sorry to have offended you,' said George.

'Pooh! pooh! you needn't look at me in that languishing way, if you are,' retorted the admiral. 'Stick to your wine; and I'll forgive you. Your good health, George. I'm glad to see you again at St. Crux. Look at that plateful of sponge-cakes! The cook has sent them up in honour of your return. We can't hurt her feelings, and we can't spoil our wine. Here!'—The admiral tossed four sponge-cakes in quick succession down the accommodating throats of the dogs. 'I am sorry, George,' the old gentleman gravely proceeded; 'I am really sorry, you haven't got your eye on one of those nice girls. You don't know what a loss you're inflicting on yourself—you don't know what trouble and mortification you're causing me—by this shilly-shally conduct of yours.'

'If you would only allow me to explain myself, sir, you would view my conduct in a totally different light. I am ready to marry to-morrow, if the lady will have me.'

'The devil you are! So you have got a lady in your eye, after all? Why in Heaven's name, couldn't you tell me so before? Never mind—I'll forgive you everything now I know you have laid your hand on a wife. Fill your glass again. Here's her health in a bumper. By-the-by, who is she?'

'I'll tell you directly, admiral. When we began this conversation, I mentioned that I was a little anxious———'

'She's not one of my round dozen of nice girls—aha, Master George, I see that in your face already! Why are you anxious?'

'I am afraid you will disapprove of my choice, sir.'

'Don't beat about the bush! How the deuce can I say . whether I disapprove or not, if you won't tell me who she is?'

'She is the eldest daughter of Andrew Vanstone of Combe-Raven.'

'Who!!!'

'Miss Vanstone, sir.'

The admiral put down his glass of wine un tasted.

'You're right, George,' he said. 'I do disapprove of your choice—strongly disapprove of it.'

'Is it the misfortune of her birth, sir, that you object to?'

'God forbid! the misfortune of her birth is not her fault, poor thing. You know, as well as I do, George, what I object to.'

'You object to her sister?'

'Certainly! The most liberal man alive might object to her sister, I think.'

'It's hard, sir, to make Miss Vanstone suffer for her sister's faults.'

‘*Faults*, do you call them? You have a mighty convenient memory, George, where your own interests are concerned.’

‘Call them crimes, if you like, sir—I say again, it’s hard on Miss Vanstone. Miss Vanstone’s life is pure of all reproach. From first to last, she has borne her hard lot with such patience, and sweetness, and courage, as not one woman in a thousand would have shown in her place. Ask Miss Garth, who has known her from childhood. Ask Mrs. Tyrrel, who blesses the day when she came into the house———’

‘Ask a fiddlestick’s end! I beg your pardon, George—but you are enough to try the patience of a saint. My good fellow, I don’t deny Miss Vanstone’s virtues. I’ll admit, if you like, she’s the best woman that ever put on a petticoat. That is not the question———’

‘Excuse me, admiral—it *is* the question, if she is to be my wife.’

‘Hear me out, George; look at it from my point of view, as well as your own. What did your cousin Noel do? Your cousin Noel fell a victim, poor fellow, to one of the vilest conspiracies I ever heard of—and the prime mover of that conspiracy was Miss Vanstone’s damnable sister. She deceived him in the most infamous manner; and as soon as she was down for a handsome legacy in his will, she had the poison ready to take his life. This is the truth—we know it from Mrs. Lecount, who found the botde locked up in her own room. If you marry Miss Vanstone, you make this wretch your sister-in-law. She becomes a member of our family. All the disgrace of what she has done; all the disgrace of what she *may* do—and the Devil who possesses her, only knows what lengths she may go to next—becomes *our* disgrace. Good Heavens, George, consider what a position that is! Consider what pitch you touch, if you make this woman your sister-in-law.’

‘You have put your side of the question, admiral,’ said George resolutely; ‘now let me put mine. A certain impression is produced on me by a young lady, whom I meet with under very interesting circumstances. I don’t act headlong on that impression, as I might have done if I had been some years younger—I wait, and put it to the trial. Every time I see this young lady, the impression strengthens; her beauty grows on me, her character grows on me; when I am away from her I am restless and dissatisfied; when I am with her I am the happiest man alive. All I hear of her conduct from those who know her best, more than confirms the high opinion I have formed of her. The one drawback I can discover, is caused by a misfortune for which she is not responsible—the misfortune of having a sister who is utterly unworthy of her. Does this discovery—an unpleasant discovery, I grant you—destroy all those good qualities in Miss Vanstone for which I love and admire her? Nothing of the sort—it only makes her good qualities all the more precious to me by contrast. If I am to have a drawback to contend with—and who expects anything else in this world?—I would infinitely rather have the drawback attached to my wife’s sister, than to my wife. My wife’s sister is not essential to my happiness, but my wife is. In my opinion, sir, Mrs. Noel Vanstone has done mischief enough already—I don’t see the necessity of letting her do more mischief, by depriving me of a good wife. Right or wrong, that is my point of view. I don’t wish to trouble you with any questions of sentiment. All I wish to say is, that I am old enough, by this time, to know my own mind—and that my mind is made up. If my marriage is essential to the execution of your intentions on my behalf, there is only one woman in the world whom I *can* marry—and that woman is Miss Vanstone.’

There was no resisting this plain declaration. Admiral Bartram rose from his chair without making any reply, and walked perturbedly up and down the room.

The situation was emphatically a serious one. Mrs. Girdlestone’s death had already produced the failure of one of the two objects contemplated by the Secret Trust. If the third of May arrived, and found George a single man, the second (and last) of the objects would then have failed in its turn. In little more than a fortnight, at the very latest, the Banns must be published in Ossory church—or the time would fail for compliance with one of the

stipulations insisted on in the Trust. Obstinate as the admiral was by nature, strongly as he felt the objections which attached to his nephew's contemplated alliance, he recoiled in spite of himself, as he paced the room and saw the facts on either side, immovably staring him in the face.

'Are you engaged to Miss Vanstone?' he asked, suddenly.

'No, sir,' replied George. 'I thought it due to your uniform kindness to me, to speak to you on the subject first.'

'Much obliged, I'm sure. And you have put off speaking to me to the last moment, just as you put off everything else. Do you think Miss Vanstone will say Yes, when you ask her?'

George hesitated.

'The devil take your modesty!' shouted the admiral. 'That is not a time for modesty—this is a time for speaking out. Will she or won't she?'

'I think she will, sir.'

The admiral laughed sardonically, and took another turn in the room. He suddenly stopped; put his hands in his pockets; and stood still in a corner, deep in thought. After an interval of a few minutes, his face cleared a little; it brightened with the dawning of a new idea. He walked round briskly to George's side of the fire, and laid his hand kindly on his nephew's shoulder.

'You're wrong, George,' he said—'but it is too late now to set you right. On the sixteenth of next month, the Banns must be put up in Ossory church, or you will lose the money. Have you told Miss Vanstone the position you stand in? Or have you put that off to the eleventh hour, like everything else?'

'The position is so extraordinary, sir, and it might lead to so much misapprehension of my motives, that I have felt unwilling to allude to it. I hardly know how I can tell her of it all.'

'Try the experiment of telling her friends. Let them know it's a question of money; and they will overcome her scruples, if you can't. But that is not what I had to say to you. How long do you propose stopping here, this time?'

'I thought of staying a few days, and then———'

'And then of going back to London, and making your offer, I suppose? Will a week give you time enough to pick your opportunity with Miss Vanstone—a week out of the fortnight or so that you have to spare?'

'I will stay here a week, admiral, with pleasure, if you wish it.'

'I don't wish it. I want you to pack up your traps, and be off to-morrow.'

George looked at his uncle, in silent astonishment.

'You found some letters waiting for you, when you got here,' proceeded the admiral. 'Was one of those letters from my old friend, Sir Franklin Brock?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Was it an invitation to you to go and stay at the Grange?'

'Yes, sir.'

‘To go at once?’

‘At once, if I could manage it.’

‘Very good. I want you to manage it. I want you to start for the Grange to-morrow.’

George looked back at the fire, and sighed impatiently.

‘I understand you now, admiral,’ he said. ‘You are entirely mistaken in me. My attachment to Miss Vanstone is not to be shaken in *that* manner.’

Admiral Bartram took his quarter-deck walk again, up and down the room.

‘One good turn deserves another, George,’ said the old gentleman. ‘If I am willing to make concessions on my side, the least you can do is to meet me half-way, and make concessions on yours.’

‘I don’t deny it, sir.’

‘Very well. Now listen to my proposal. Give me a fair hearing, George—a fair hearing is every man’s privilege. I will be perfectly just to begin with. I won’t attempt to deny that you honestly believe Miss Vanstone is the only woman in the world who can make you happy. I don’t question that. What I do question is, whether you really know your own mind in this matter, quite so well as you think you know it yourself. You can’t deny, George, that you have been in love with a good many women in your time? Among the rest of them, you have been in love with Miss Brock. No longer ago than this time last year, there was a sneaking kindness between you and that young lady, to say the least of it. And quite right, too! Miss Brock is one of that round dozen of darlings I mentioned over our first glass of wine.’

‘You are confusing an idle flirtation, sir, with a serious attachment,’ said George. ‘You are altogether mistaken —you are indeed.’

‘Likely enough; I don’t pretend to be infallible—I leave that to my juniors. But I happen to have known you, George, since you were the height of my old telescope; and I want to have this serious attachment of yours put to the test. If you can satisfy me that your whole heart and soul are as strongly set on Miss Vanstone, as you suppose them to be—I must knock under to necessity, and keep my objections to myself. But I *must* be satisfied first, Go to the Grange to-morrow, and stay there a week in Miss Brock’s society. Give that charming girl a fair chance of lighting up the old flame again, if she can—and then come back to St. Crux, and let me hear the result. If you tell me, as an honest man, that your attachment to Miss Vanstone still remains unshaken, you will have heard the last of my objections from that moment. Whatever misgivings I may feel in my own mind, I will say nothing, and do nothing, adverse to your wishes. There is my proposal. I dare say it looks like an old man’s folly, in your eyes. But the old man won’t trouble you much longer, George—and it may be a pleasant reflection when you have got sons of your own, to remember that you humoured him in his last days.’

He came back to the fireplace, as he said those words, and laid his hand once more on his nephew’s shoulder. George took the hand and pressed it affectionately. In the tenderest and best sense of the word, his uncle had been a father to him.

‘I will do what you ask me, sir,’ he replied, ‘if you seriously wish it. But it is only right to tell you that the experiment will be perfectly useless. However, if you prefer my passing a week at the Grange, to my passing it here—to the Grange I will go.’

‘Thank you, George,’ said the admiral, bluntly. ‘I expected as much from you, and you have not disappointed

me. If Miss Brock doesn't get us out of this mess,' thought the wily old gendeman, as he resumed his place at the table, 'my nephew's weathercock of a head has turned steady with a vengeance! We'll consider the question setded for to-night, George,' he continued aloud, 'and call another subject. These family anxieties don't improve the flavour of my old claret. The bottle stands with you. What are they doing at the theatres in London? We always patronized the theatres, in my time, in the Navy. We used to like a good tragedy to begin with, and a hornpipe to cheer us up at the end of the entertainment.'

For the rest of the evening, the talk flowed in the ordinary channels. Admiral Bartram only returned to the forbidden subject, when he and his nephew parted for the night.

'You won't forget to-morrow, George?'

'Certainly not, sir. I'll take the dog-cart, and drive myself over after breakfast.'

Before noon the next day, Mr. George Bartram had left the house, and the last chance in Magdalen's favour had left it with him.

Chapter IV

When the servants' dinner-bell at St. Crux rang as usual on the day of George Bartram's departure, it was remarked that the new parlour-maid's place at table remained empty. One of the inferior servants was sent to her room to make inquiries, and returned with the information that 'Louisa' felt a littie faint, and begged that her attendance at table might be excused for that day. Upon this, the superior authority of the housekeeper was invoked; and Mrs. Drake went up-stairs immediately to ascertain the truth for herself. Her first look of inquiry satisfied her that the parlour-maid's indisposition, whatever the cause of it might be, was certainly not assumed to serve any idle or sullen purpose of her own. She respectfully declined taking any of the remedies which the housekeeper offered, and merely requested permission to try the efficacy of a walk in the fresh air.

'I have been accustomed to more exercise, ma'am, than I take here,' she said. 'Might I go into the garden, and try what the air will do for me?'

'Certainly. Can you walk by yourself? or shall I send some one with you?'

'I will go by myself, if you please, ma'am.'

'Very well. Put on your bonnet and shawl—and, when you get out, keep in the east garden. The admiral sometimes walks in the north garden, and he might feel surprised at seeing you there. Come to my room, when you have had air and exercise enough, and let me see how you are.'———. x

In a few minutes more, Magdalen was out in the east garden. The sky was clear and sunny; but the cold shadow of the house rested on the garden walk, and chilled the midday air. She walked towards the ruins of the old monastery, situated on the south side of the more modern range of buildings. Here, there were lonely open spaces to breathe in freely; here, the pale March sunshine stole through the gaps of desolation and decay, and met her invitingly with the genial promise of spring.

She ascended three or four riven stone steps, and seated herself on some ruined fragments beyond them, full in the sunshine. The place she had chosen had once been the entrance to the church. In centuries long gone by, the

stream of human sin and human suffering had flowed, day after day, to the confessional, over the place where she now sat. Of all the miserable women who had trodden those old stones in the bygone time, no more miserable creature had touched them, than the woman whose feet rested on them now.

Her hands trembled as she placed them on either side of her, to support herself on the stone seat. She laid them on her lap—they trembled there. She held them out, and looked at them wonderingly—they trembled as she looked. 'Like an old woman!' she said faindy—and let them drop again at her side.

For the first time, that morning, the cruel discovery had forced itself on her mind—the discovery that her strength was failing her, at the time when she had most confidently trusted to it, at the time when she wanted it most. She had felt the surprise of Mr. Bartram's unexpected departure, as if it had been the shock of the severest calamity that could have befallen her. That one check to her hopes—a check which, at other times, would only have roused the resisting power in her to new efforts—had struck her with as suffocating a terror, had prostrated her with as allmastering a despair, as if she had been overwhelmed by the crowning disaster of expulsion from St. Crux. But one warning could be read, in such a change as this. Into the space of little more than a year, she had crowded the wearing and wasting emotions of a life. The bountiful gifts of health and strength, so prodigally heaped on her by Nature, so long abused with impunity, were failing her at last.

She looked up at the far faint blue of the sky. She heard the joyous singing of birds among the ivy that clothed the ruins. Oh, the cold distance of the heavens! Oh, the pitiless happiness of the birds! Oh, the lonely horror of sitting there, and feeling old and weak and worn, in the heyday of her youth! She rose with a last effort of resolution, and tried to keep back the hysterical passion swelling at her heart, by moving and looking about her. Rapidly and more rapidly, she walked to and fro in the sunshine. The exercise helped her, through the very fatigue that she felt from it. She forced the rising tears desperately back to their sources—she fought with the clinging pain, and wrenched it from its hold. little by little, her mind began to clear again: the despairing fear of herself, grew less vividly present to her thoughts. There were reserves of youth and strength in her, still to be wasted—there was a spirit, sorely wounded, but not yet subdued.

She gradually extended the limits of her walk; she gradually recovered the exercise of her observation.

At the western extremity, the remains of the monastery were in a less ruinous condition than at the eastern. In certain places, where the stout old walls still stood, repairs had been made at some former time. Roofs of red tile had been laid roughly over four of the ancient cells; wooden doors had been added; and the old monastic chambers had been used as sheds to hold the multifarious lumber of St. Crux. No padlocks guarded any of the doors. Magdalen had only to push them, to let the daylight in on the litter inside. She resolved to investigate the sheds, one after the other—not from curiosity; not with the idea of making discoveries of any sort. Her only object was to fill up the vacant time, and to keep the thoughts that unnerved her from returning to her mind.

The first shed she opened, contained the gardener's utensils, laige and small. The second was littered with fragments of broken furniture, empty picture-frames of worm-eaten wood, shattered vases, boxes without covers, and books tom from their bindings. As Magdalen turned to leave the shed, after one careless glance round her at the lumber that it contained, her foot struck something on the ground which tinkled against a fragment of china lying near it. She stooped, and discovered that the tinkling substance was a rusty key.

She picked up the key, and looked at it. She walked out into the air, and considered a little. More old forgotten keys were probably lying about among the lumber in the sheds. What, if she collected all she could find, and tried them, one after another, in the locks of the cabinets and cupboards now closed against her? Was there chance enough that any one of them might fit, to justify her in venturing on the experiment? If the locks at St. Crux were as old-fashioned as the furniture—if there were no protective niceties of modem invention to contend

against—there was chance enough beyond all question. Who could say whether the very key in her hand, might not be the lost duplicate of one of the keys on the admiral's bunch? In the dearth of all other means of finding the way to her end, the risk was worth running. A flash of the old spirit sparkled in her weary eyes, as she turned, and re-entered the shed.

Half an hour more brought her to the limits of the time which she could venture to allow herself in the open air. In that interval, she had searched the sheds from first to last, and had found five more keys. 'Five more chances!' she thought to herself, as she hid the keys, and hastily returned to the house.

After first reporting herself in the housekeeper's room, she went upstairs to remove her bonnet and shawl; taking that opportunity to hide the keys in her bedchamber, until night came. They were crusted thick with rust and dirt; but she dared not attempt to clean them, until bedtime secluded her from the prying eyes of the servants, in the solitude of her room.

When the dinner hour brought her, as usual, into personal contact with the admiral, she was at once struck by a change in him. For the first time in her experience, the old gentleman was silent and depressed. He ate less than usual, and he hardly said five words to her, from the beginning of the meal to the end. Some unwelcome subject of reflection had evidently fixed itself on his mind, and remained there persistently, in spite of his efforts to shake it off. At intervals through the evening, she wondered with an ever-growing perplexity what the subject could be.

At last, the lagging hours reached their end, and bedtime came. Before she slept that night, Magdalen had cleaned the keys from all impurities, and had oiled the wards, to help them smoothly into the locks. The last difficulty that remained, was the difficulty of choosing the time when the experiment might be tried, with the least risk of interruption and discovery. After carefully considering the question overnight, Magdalen could only resolve to wait and be guided by the events of the next day.

The morning came; and, for the first time at St. Crux, events justified the trust she had placed in them. The morning came—and the one remaining difficulty that perplexed her, was unexpectedly smoothed away by no less a person than the admiral himself! To the surprise of every one in the house, he announced at breakfast, that he had arranged to start for London in an hour; that he should pass the night in town; and that he might be expected to return to St. Crux in time for dinner on the next day. He volunteered no further explanations, to the housekeeper, or to any one else—but it was easy to see that his errand to London was of no ordinary importance in his own estimation. He swallowed his breakfast in a violent hurry; and he was impatiently ready for the carriage before it came to the door.

Experience had taught Magdalen to be cautious. She waited a little, after Admiral Bartram's departure, before she ventured on trying her experiment with the keys. It was well she did so. Mrs. Drake took advantage of the admiral's absence to review the condition of the apartments on the first floor. The results of the investigation by no means satisfied her; brooms and dusters were set to work; and the housemaids were in and out of the rooms perpetually, as long as the daylight lasted.

The evening passed; and still the safe opportunity for which Magdalen was on the watch never presented itself. Bedtime came again; and found her placed between the two alternatives of trusting to the doubtful chances of the next morning—or of trying the keys boldly in the dead of night. In former times, she would have made her choice without hesitation. She hesitated now—but the wreck of her old courage still sustained her, and she determined to make the venture at night.

They kept early hours at St. Crux. If she waited in her room until half-past eleven, she would wait long enough.

At that time, she stole out on to the staircase, with the keys in her pocket, and the candle in her hand.

On passing the entrance to the corridor on the bedroom floor, she stopped and listened. No sound of snoring, no shuffling of infirm footsteps, was to be heard on the other side of the screen. She looked round it distrustfully. The stone passage was a solitude, and the truckle-bed was empty. Her own eyes had shown her old Mazey on his way to the upper regions, more than an hour since, with a candle in his hand. Had he taken advantage of his master's absence, to enjoy the unaccustomed luxury of sleeping in a room? As the thought occurred to her, a sound from the farther end of the corridor just caught her ear. She softly advanced towards it; and heard through the door of the last and remotest of the spare bed-chambers, the veteran's lusty snoring in the room inside. The discovery was startling, in more senses than one. It deepened the impenetrable mystery of the truckle-bed; for it showed plainly that old Mazey had no barbarous preference of his own for passing his nights in the corridor—he occupied that strange and comfortless sleeping-place, purely and entirely on his master's account.

It was no time for dwelling on the reflections which this conclusion might suggest. Magdalen retraced her steps along the passage, and descended to the first floor. Passing the doors nearest to her, she tried the library first. On the staircase, and in the corridors, she had felt her heart throbbing fast with an unutterable fear—but a sense of security returned to her when she found herself within the four walls of the room, and when she had closed the door on the ghostly quiet outside.

The first lock she tried was the lock of the table-drawer. None of the keys fitted it. Her next experiment was made on the cabinet. Would the second attempt fail, like the first?

No! One of the keys fitted; one of the keys, with a little patient management, turned the lock. She looked in eagerly. There were open shelves above, and one long drawer under them. The shelves were devoted to specimens of curious minerals, neatly labelled and arranged. The drawer was divided into compartments. Two of the compartments contained papers. In the first, she discovered nothing but a collection of receipted bills. In the second, she found a heap of business-documents—but the writing, yellow with age, was enough of itself to warn her that the Trust was not there. She shut the doors of the cabinet; and, after locking them again with some little difficulty, proceeded to try the keys in the book-case cupboards next, before she continued her investigations in the other rooms.

The book-case cupboards were unassailable; the drawers and cupboards in all the other rooms were unassailable. One after another, she tried them patiently in regular succession. It was useless. The chance which the cabinet in the library had offered in her favour, was the first chance and the last.

She went back to her room; seeing nothing but her own gliding shadow; hearing nothing but her own stealthy footfall in the midnight stillness of the house. After mechanically putting the keys away in their former hiding-place, she looked towards her bed—and turned away from it, shuddering. The warning remembrance of what she had suffered that morning in the garden, was vividly present to her mind. 'Another chance tried,' she thought to herself, 'and another chance lost! I shall break down again if I think of it—and I shall think of it, if I he awake in the dark.' She had brought a work-box with her to St. Crux, as one of the many little things which in her character of a servant it was desirable to possess; and she now opened the box, and applied herself resolutely to work. Her want of dexterity with her needle, assisted the object she had in view; it obliged her to pay the closest attention to her employment; it forced her thoughts away from the two subjects of all others which she now dreaded most—herself and the future.

The next day, as he had arranged, the admiral returned. His visit to London had not improved his spirits. The shadow of some unconquerable doubt still clouded his face: his restless tongue was strangely quiet, while Magdalen waited on him at his solitary meal. That night, the snoring resounded once more on the inner side of

the screen, and old Mazey was back again in the comfortless truckle-bed.

Three more days passed—April came. On the second of the month—returning as unexpectedly as he had departed a week before—Mr. George Bartram reappeared at St. Crux.

He came back early in the afternoon; and had an interview with his uncle in the library. The interview over, he left the house again; and was driven to the railway by the groom, in time to catch the last train to London that night. The groom noticed, on the road, that 'Mr. George seemed to be rather pleased than otherwise at leaving St. Crux.' He also remarked, on his return, that the admiral swore at him for over-driving the horses—an indication of ill-temper, on the part of his master, which he described as being entirely without precedent, in all his former experience. Magdalen, in her department of service, had suffered in like manner under the old man's irritable humour: he had been dissatisfied with everything she did in the dining-room; and he had found fault with all the dishes, one after another, from the mutton broth to the toasted cheese.

The next two days passed as usual. On the third day an event happened. In appearance, it was nothing more important than a ring at the drawing-room bell. In reality, it was the forerunner of approaching catastrophe—the formidable herald of the end.

It was Magdalen's business to answer the bell. On reaching the drawing-room door, she knocked as usual. There was no reply. After again knocking, and again receiving no answer, she ventured into the room—and was instantly met by a current of cold air flowing full on her face. The heavy sliding-door in the opposite wall was pushed back, and the Arctic atmosphere of Freeze-your-Bones was pouring unhindered into the empty room.

She waited near the door, doubtful what to do next; it was certainly the drawing-room bell that had rung, and no other. She waited, looking through the open doorway opposite, down the wilderness of the dismantled Hall.

A little consideration satisfied her that it would be best to go down-stairs again, and wait there for a second summons from the bell. On turning to leave the room, she happened to look back once more; and exactly at that moment, she saw the door open at the opposite extremity of the Banqueting-Hall—the door leading into the first of the apartments in the east wing. A tall man came out, wearing his greatcoat and his hat, and rapidly approached the drawing-room. His gait betrayed him, while he was still too far off for his features to be seen. Before he was quite half-way across the Hall, Magdalen had recognized—the admiral.

He looked, not irritated only, but surprised as well, at finding his parlour maid waiting for him in the drawingroom, and inquired, sharply and suspiciously—what she wanted there? Magdalen replied that she had come there to answer the bell. His face cleared a litde, when he heard the explanation. 'Yes, yes; to be sure,' he said. 'I did ring, and then I forgot it.' He pulled the sliding-door back into its place as he spoke. 'Coals,' he resumed, impatiendy, pointing to the empty scutde. 'I rang for coals.'

Magdalen went back to the kitchen regions. After communicating the admiral's order to the servant whose special duty it was to attend to the fires, she returned to the pantry; and gently closing the door, sat down alone to think.

It had been her impression in the drawing-room—and it was her impression still—that she had accidentally surprised Admiral Rartram on a visit to the east rooms, which, for some urgent reason of his own, he wished to keep a secret. Haunted day and night by the one dominant idea that now possessed her, she leapt all logical difficulties at a bound; and at once associated the suspicion of a secret proceeding on the admiral's part, with the kindred suspicion which pointed to him as the depositary of the Secret Trust. Up to this time, it had been her settled belief that he kept all his important documents in one or other of the suite of rooms which he happened to be occupying for the time being. Why^—she now asked herself, with a sudden distrust of the conclusion which

had hitherto satisfied her mind—why might he not lock some of them up in the other rooms as well? The remembrance of the keys still concealed in their hiding-place in her room, sharpened her sense of the reasonableness of this new view. With one unimportant exception, those keys had all failed when she tried them in the rooms on the north side of the house. Might they not succeed with the cabinets and cupboards in the east rooms, on which she had never tried them or thought of trying them, yet? If there was a chance, however small, of turning them to better account than she had turned them thus far, it was a chance to be tried. If there was a possibility, however remote, that the Trust might be hidden in any one of the locked repositories in the east wing, it was a possibility to be put to the test. When? Her own experience answered the question. At the time when no prying eyes were open, and no accidents were to be feared—when the house was quiet—in the dead of night.

She knew enough of her changed self to dread the enervating influence of delay. She determined to run the risk, headlong, that night.

More blunders escaped her, when dinner-time came; the admiral's criticisms on her waiting at table were sharper than ever. His hardest words inflicted no pain on her; she scarcely heard him—her mind was dull to every sense but the sense of the coming trial. The evening which had passed slowly to her on the night of her first experiment with the keys, passed quickly now. When bedtime came, bedtime took her by surprise.

She waited longer, on this occasion, than she had waited before. The admiral was at home; he might alter his mind and go down-stairs again, after he had gone up to his room; he might have forgotten something in the library, and might return to fetch it. Midnight struck from the clock in the servants' hall, before she ventured out of her room, with the keys again in her pocket, with the candle again in her hand.

At the first of the stairs on which she set her foot to descend, an di-mastering hesitation, an unintelligible shrinking from some peril unknown, seized her on a sudden. She waited, and reasoned with herself. She had recoiled from no sacrifices, she had yielded to no fears, in carrying out the stratagem by which she had gained admission to St. Crux; and now, when the long array of difficulties at the outset had been patiently conquered,—now, when by sheer force of resolution the starting-point was gained, she hesitated to advance. 'I shrank from nothing to get here,' she said to herself. 'What madness possesses me that I shrink now?'

Every pulse in her quickened at the thought, with an animating shame that nerved her to go on. She descended the stairs, from the third floor to the second, from the second to the first, without trusdng herself to pause again within easy reach of her own room. In another minute, she had reached the end of the corridor, had crossed the vestibule, and had entered the drawing-room. It was only when her grasp was on the heavy brass handle of the sliding-door—it was only at the moment before she pushed the door back—that she waited to take breath. The Banqueting-Hall was close on the other side of the wooden partition against which she stood; her excited imagination felt the death-like chill of it flowing over her already.

She pushed back the sliding-door a few inches—and stopped in momentary alarm. When the admiral had closed it in her presence that day, she had heard no noise. When old Mazey had opened it to show her the rooms in the east wing, she had heard no noise. Now, in the night silence, she noticed for the first time, that the door made a sound—a dull, rushing sound, like the wind.

She roused herself, and pushed it farther back—pushed it half way into the hollow chamber in the wall constructed to receive it. She advanced boldly into the gap, and met the night-view of the Banqueting-Hall face to face.

The moon was rounding the southern side of the house. Her paling beams streamed through the nearer windows,

and lay in long strips of slanting light on the marble pavement of the Hall. The black shadows of the pediments between each window, alternating with the strips of light, heightened the wan glare of the moonshine on the floor. Towards its lower end, the Hall melted mysteriously into darkness. The ceiling was lost to view; the yawning fireplace, the overhanging mantelpiece, the long row of battle-pictures above, were all swallowed up in night. But one visible object was discernible, besides the gleaming windows and the moon-striped floor. Midway in the last and farthest of the strips of light, the tripod rose erect on its gaunt black legs, like a monster called to life by the moon—a monster rising through the light, and melting invisibly into the upper shadows of the Hall. Far and near, all sound lay dead, drowned in the stagnant cold. The soothing hush of night was awful here. The deep abysses of darkness hid abysses of silence more immeasurable still.

She stood motionless in the doorway, with straining eyes, with straining ears. She looked for some moving thing, she listened for some rising sound—and looked and listened in vain. A quick ceaseless shivering ran through her from head to foot. The shivering of fear? or the shivering of cold? The bare doubt roused her resolute will. 'Now,' she thought, advancing a step through the doorway—'or never! I'll count the strips of moonlight three times over—and cross the Hall.'

'One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five.'

As the final number passed her lips at the third time of counting, she crossed the Hall. Looking for nothing, listening for nothing, one hand holding the candle, the other mechanically grasping the folds of her dress—she sped ghosdike down the length of the ghostly place. She reached the door of the first of the eastern rooms—opened it—and ran in. The sudden relief of attaining a refuge, the sudden entrance into a new atmosphere, overpowered her for the moment. She had just time to put the candle safely on a table, before she dropped giddy and breathless into the nearest chair.

Little by litde, she felt the rest quieting her. In a few minutes, she became conscious of the triumph of having won her way to the east rooms. In a few minutes, she was strong enough to rise from the chair, to take the keys from her pocket, and to look round her.

The first objects of furniture in the room which attracted her attention, were an old bureau of carved oak, and a heavy buhl table with a cabinet attached. She tried the bureau first: it looked the likeliest receptacle for papers of the two. Three of the keys proved to be of a size to enter the lock—but none of them would turn it. The bureau was unassailable. She left it, and paused to trim the wick of the candle before she tried the buhl cabinet next.

At the moment when she raised her hand to the candle, she heard the stillness of the Banqueting-Hall shudder with the terror of a sound—a sound, faint and momentary, like the distant rushing of the wind.

The sliding-door in the drawing-room had moved.

Which way had it moved? Had an unknown hand pushed it back in its socket, farther than she had pushed it—or pulled it to again, and closed it? The horror of being shut out all night, by some undiscoverable agency, from the life of the house, was stronger in her than the horror of looking across the Banqueting-Hall. She made desperately for the door of the room.

It had fallen to silently after her, when she had come in, but it was not closed. She pulled it open—and looked.

The sight that met her eyes, rooted her panic-stricken to the spot.

Close to the first of the row of windows, counting from the drawing-room, and full in the gleam of it, she saw a solitary figure. It stood motionless, rising out of the farthest strip of moonlight on the floor. As she looked, it

suddenly disappeared. In another instant, she saw it again, in the second strip of moonlight—lost it again—saw it in the third strip—lost it once more—and saw it in the fourth. Moment by moment, it advanced, now mysteriously lost in the shadow, now suddenly visible again in the light, until it reached the fifth and nearest strip of moonlight. There it paused, and strayed aside slowly to the middle of the Hall. It stopped at the tripod, and stood, shivering audibly in the silence, with its hands raised over the dead ashes, in the action of warming them at a fire. It turned back again, moving down the path of the moonlight—stopped at the fifth window—turned once more—and came on softly through the shadow, straight to the place where Magdalen stood.

Her voice was dumb, her will was helpless. Every sense in her but the seeing-sense, was paralysed. The seeing-sense—held fast in the fetters of its own terror—looked unchangeably straightforward, as it had looked from the first. There she stood in the doorway, full in the path of the figure advancing on her through the shadow, nearer and nearer, step by step.

It came close.

The bonds of horror that held her, burst asunder when it was within arm's length. She started back. The fight of the candle on the table fell full on its face, and showed her—Admiral Bartram.

A long grey dressing-gown was wrapped round him. His head was uncovered; his feet were bare. In his left hand he carried his little basket of keys. He passed Magdalen slowly; his lips whispering without intermission; his open eyes staring straight before him, with the glassy stare of death. His eyes revealed to her the terrifying truth. He was walking in his sleep.

The terror of seeing him, as she saw him now, was not the terror she had felt when her eyes first lighted on him—an apparition in the moonlight, a spectre in the ghostly Hall. This time, she could struggle against the shock; she could feel the depth of her own fear.

He passed her, and stopped in the middle of the room. Magdalen ventured near enough to him to be within reach of his voice, as he muttered to himself. She ventured nearer still, and heard the name of her dead husband fall distinctly from the sleep-walker's lips.

'Noel!' he said, in the low monotonous tones of a dreamer talking in his sleep. 'My good fellow, Noel, take it back again! It worries me day and night. I don't know where it's safe; I don't know where to put it. Take it back, Noel—take it back!'

As those words escaped him, he walked to the buhl cabinet. He sat down in the chair placed before it, and searched in the basket among his keys. Magdalen softly followed him, and stood behind his chair, waiting with the candle in her hand. He found the key, and unlocked the cabinet. Without an instant's hesitation, he drew out a drawer, the second of a row. The one thing in the drawer, was a folded letter. He removed it, and put it down before him on the table. 'Take it back, Noel!' he repeated, mechanically; 'take it back!'

Magdalen looked over his shoulder, and read these lines, traced in her husband's handwriting, at the top of the letter:—*To be kept in your oum possession, and to be opened by yourself only, on the day of my decease. Noel Vanstone*. She saw the words plainly, with the admiral's name and the admiral's address written under them.

The Trust within reach of her hand! The Trust traced to its hiding-place at last!

She took one step forward, to steal round his chair and to snatch the letter from the table. At the instant when she moved, he took it up once more; locked the cabinet, and, rising, turned and faced her.

In the impulse of the moment, she stretched out her hand towards the hand in which he held the letter. The

yellow candlelight fell full on him. The awful death-in-life of his face—the mystery of the sleeping body, moving in unconscious obedience to the dreaming mind—daunted her. Her hand trembled, and dropped again at her side.

He put the key of the cabinet back in the basket; and crossed the room to the bureau, with the basket in one hand, and the letter in the other. Magdalen set the candle on the table again, and watched him. As he had opened the cabinet, so he now opened the bureau. Once more, Magdalen stretched out her hand; and once more she recoiled before the mystery and the terror of his sleep. He put the letter in a drawer, at the back of the bureau, and closed the heavy oaken lid again. 'Yes,' he said. 'Safer there, as you say, Noel—safer there.' So he.spoke. So, time after time, the words that betrayed him, revealed the dead man living and speaking again in the dream.

Had he locked the bureau? Magdalen had not heard the lock turn. As he slowly moved away, walking back once more towards the middle of the room, she tried the lid. It was locked. That discovery made, she looked to see what he was doing next. He was leaving the room again, with his basket of keys in his hand. When her first glance overtook him, he was crossing the threshold of the door.

Some inscrutable fascination possessed her; some mysterious attraction drew her after him, in spite of herself. She took up the candle, and followed him mechanically, as if she too were walking in her sleep. One behind the other, in slow and noiseless progress, they crossed the Banqueting-Hall. One behind the other, they passed through the drawing-room, and along the corridor, and up the stairs. She followed him to his own door. He went in, and shut it behind him softly. She stopped, and looked towards the truckle-bed. It was pushed aside at the foot, some litde distance away from the bedroom door. Who had moved it? She held the candle close, and looked towards the pillow, with a sudden curiosity and a sudden doubt.

The truckle-bed was empty.

The discovery startled her for the moment, and for the moment only. Plain as the inferences were to be drawn from it, she never drew them. Her mind slowly recovering the exercise of its faculties, was still under the influence of the earlier and the deeper impressions produced on it. Her mind followed the admiral into his room, as her body had followed him across the Banqueting-Hall.

Had he lain down again in his bed? Was he still asleep? She listened at the door. Not a sound was audible in the room. She tried the door; and, finding it not locked, softly opened it a few inches, and listened again. The rise and fall of his low, regular breathing instantly caught her ear. He was still asleep.

She went into the room, and, shading the candlelight with her hand, approached the bed-side to look at him. The dream was past; the old man's sleep was deep and peaceful—his tips were still; his quiet hand was laid over the coverlet, in motionless repose. He lay with his face turned towards the right-hand side of the bed. A little table stood there, within reach of his hand. Four objects were placed on it: his candle; his matches; his customary night-drink of lemonade—and his basket of keys.

The idea of possessing herself of his keys that night (if an opportunity offered when the basket was not in his hand), had first crossed her mind when she saw him go into his room. She had lost it again, for the moment, in the surprise of discovering the empty truckle-bed. She now recovered it, the instant the table attracted her attention. It was useless to waste time in trying to choose the one key wanted from the rest—the one key was not well enough known to her to be readily identified. She took all the keys from the table, in the basket as they lay, and noiselessly closed the door behind her, on leaving the room.

The truckle-bed, as she passed it, obtruded itself again on her attention; and forced her to think of it. After a moment's consideration, she moved the foot of the bed back to its customary position across the door. Whether

he was in the house or out of it, the veteran might return to his deserted post at any moment. If he saw the bed moved from its usual place, he might suspect something wrong—he might rouse his master—and the loss of the keys might be discovered.

Nothing happened as she descended the stairs; nothing happened as she passed along the corridor—the house was as silent and as solitary as ever. She crossed the Banqueting-Hall, this time, without hesitation; the events of the night had hardened her mind against all imaginary terrors. 'Now I have got it!' she whispered to herself, in an irrepressible outburst of exultation, as she entered the first of the east rooms, and put her candle on the top of the old bureau.

Even yet, there was a trial in store for her patience. Some minutes elapsed, minutes that seemed hours, before she found the right key, and raised the lid of the bureau. At last, she drew out the inner drawer! At last, she had the letter in her hand!

It had been sealed, but the seal was broken. She opened it on the spot, to make sure that she had actually possessed herself of the Trust, before leaving the room. The end of the letter was the first part of it she turned to. It came to its conclusion high on the third page, and it was signed by Noel Vanstone. Below the name, these lines were added in the admiral's handwriting:—

'This letter was received by me, at the same time with the will of my friend, Noel Vanstone. In the event of my death, without leaving any other directions respecting it, I beg my nephew and my executors to understand that I consider the requests made in this document as absolutely binding on me.—Arthur Everard Bartram.'

She left those lines unread. She just noticed that they were not in Noel Vanstone's handwriting; and, passing over them instandy, as immaterial to the object in view, turned the leaves of the letter, and transferred her attention to the opening sentences on the first page.

She read these words:—

'Dear Admiral Bartram,

'When you open my Will (in which you are named my sole executor), you will find that I have bequeathed the whole residue of my estate—after payment of one legacy of five thousand pounds—to yourself. It is the purpose of my letter to tell you privately what the object is for which I have left you the fortune which is now placed in your hands.

'I beg you to consider this large legacy as intended———'

She had proceeded thus far with breathless curiosity and interest—when her attention suddenly failed her. Something—she was too deeply absorbed to know what—had got between her and the letter. Was it a sound in the Banqueting-Hall again? She looked over her shoulder at the door behind her, and listened. Nothing was to be heard; nothing was to be seen. She returned to the letter.

The writing was cramped and close. In her impatient curiosity to read more, she failed to find the lost place again. Her eyes, attracted by a blot, lighted on a sentence lower in the page than the sentence at which she had left off. The first three words she saw, riveted her attention anew—they were the first words she had met with in the letter which directly referred to George Bartram. In the sudden excitement of that discovery, she read the rest of the sentence eagerly, before she made any second attempt to return to the lost place:—

'If your nephew fails to comply with these conditions—that is to say, if being either a bachelor or a widower at the time of my decease, he fails to marry in all respects as I have here instructed him to marry, within Six

calendar months from that time—it is my desire that he shall not receive———’

She had read to that point, to that last word and no farther—when a Hand passed suddenly from behind her, between the letter and her eye, and gripped her fast by the wrist in an instant.

She turned with a shriek of terror; and found herself face to face with old Mazey.

The veteran’s eyes were bloodshot; his hand was heavy; his list slippers were twisted crookedly on his feet; and his body swayed to and fro on his widely-parted legs. If he had tested his condition, that night, by the unfailing criterion of the model ship, he must have inevitably pronounced sentence on himself in the usual form:—‘Drunk again, Mazey; drunk again.’

‘You young Jezabel!’* said the old sailor, with a leer on one side of his face, and a frown on the other. ‘The next time you take to night-walking in the neighbourhood of Freeze-your-Bones, use those sharp eyes of yours first, and make sure there’s nobody else night-walking in the garden outside. Drop it, Jezabel!—drop it!’

Keeping fast hold of Magdalen’s arm with one hand, he took the letter from her with the other, put it back into the open drawer, and locked the bureau. She never struggled with him, she never spoke. Her energy was gone; her powers of resistance were crushed. The terrors of that horrible night, following one close on the other in reiterated shocks, had struck her down at last. She yielded as submissively, she trembled as helplessly, as the weakest woman living.

Old Mazey dropped her arm, and pointed with drunken solemnity to a chair in an inner corner of the room. She sat down, still without uttering a word. The veteran (breathing very hard over it) steadied himself on both elbows against the slanting top of the bureau, and from that commanding position, addressed Magdalen once more.

‘Come and be locked up!’ said old Mazey, wagging his venerable head with judicial severity. ‘There’ll be a court of inquiry to-morrow morning; and I’m witness—worse luck!—I’m witness. You young jade, you’ve committed burglary—that’s what you’ve done. His honour the admiral’s keys stolen; his honour the admiral’s desk ramsacked; and his honour the admiral’s private letters broke open. Burglary! Burglary! Come and be locked up!’ He slowly recovered an upright position, with the assistance of his hands, backed by the solid resisting power of the bureau; and lapsed into lachrymose soliloquy. ‘Who’d have thought it?’ said old Mazey, paternally watering at the eyes. ‘Take the outside of her, and she’s as straight as a poplar; take the inside of her, and she’s as crooked as Sin. Such a fine-grown girl, too. What a pity! what a pity!’

‘Don’t hurt me!’ said Magdalen faintly, as old Mazey staggered up to the chair, and took her by the wrist again. ‘I’m frightened, Mr. Mazey—I’m dreadfully frightened.’

‘Hurt you?’ repeated the veteran. ‘I’m a deal too fond of you—and more shame for me at my age!—to hurt you. If I let go of your wrist, will you walk straight before me, where I can see you all the way? Will you be a good girl, and walk straight up to your own door?’

Magdalen gave the promise required of her—gave it with an eager longing to reach the refuge of her room. She rose, and tried to take the candle from the bureau—but old Mazey’s cunning hand was too quick for her. ‘Let the candle be,’ said the veteran, winking in momentary forgetfulness of his responsible position. ‘You’re a trifle quicker on your legs than I am, my dear—and you might leave me in tiie lurch, if I don’t carry the tight.’

They returned to the inhabited side of the house. Staggering after Magdalen, with the basket of keys in one hand, and the candle in the other, old Mazey sorrowfully compared her figure with the straightness of the poplar,

and her disposition with the crookedness of Sin, all the way across 'Freeze-your-Bones,' and all the way up-stairs to her own door. Arrived at that destination, he peremptorily refused to give her the candle, until he had first seen her safely inside the room. The conditions being complied with, he resigned the light with one hand, and made a dash with the other at the key—drew it from the inside of the lock—and instantly closed the door. Magdalen heard him outside, chuckling over his own dexterity, and fitting the key into the lock again, with infinite difficulty. At last he secured the door, with a deep grunt of relief. 'There she is safe!' Magdalen heard him say, in regretful soliloquy. 'As fine a girl as ever I set eyes on. What a pity! what a pity!'

The last sounds of his voice died out in the distance; and she was left alone in her room.

Holding fast by the banister, old Mazey made his way down to the corridor on the second floor, in which a night-light was always burning. He advanced to the truckle-bed; and, steadying himself against the opposite wall, looked at it attentively. Prolonged contemplation of his own resting-place for the night, apparently failed to satisfy him. He shook his head ominously; and, taking from the side-pocket of his great-coat a pair of old patched slippers, surveyed them with an aspect of illimitable doubt. 'I'm all abroad to-night,' he mumbled to himself. 'Troubled in my mind—that's what it is—troubled in my mind.'

The old patched slippers and the veteran's existing perplexities, happened to be intimately associated, one with the other, in the relation of cause and effect. The slippers belonged to the admiral, who had taken one of his unreasonable fancies to this particular pair, and who still persisted in wearing them, long after they were unfit for his service. Early that afternoon, old Mazey had taken the slippers to the village cobbler to get them repaired on the spot, before his master called for them the next morning. He sat superintending the progress and completion of the work, until evening came; when he and the cobbler betook themselves to the village inn to drink each other's healths at parting. They had prolonged this social ceremony till far into the night; and they had parted, as a necessary consequence, in a finished and perfect state of intoxication on either side.

If the drinking-bout had led to no other result than those night wanderings in the grounds of St. Crux, which had shown old Mazey the light in the east windows, his memory would unquestionably have presented it to him the next morning, in the aspect of one of the praiseworthy achievements of his life. But another consequence had sprung from it, which the old sailor now saw dimly, through the interposing bewilderment left in his brain by the drink. He had committed a breach of discipline, and a breach of trust. In plainer words, he had deserted his post.

The one safeguard against Admiral Bartram's constitutional tendency to somnambulism, was the watch and ward which his faithful old servant kept outside his door. No entreaties had ever prevailed on him to submit to the usual precaution taken in such cases. He peremptorily declined to be locked into his room; he even ignored his own liability, whenever a dream disturbed him, to walk in his sleep. Over and over again, old Mazey had been roused by the admiral's attempts to push past the truckle-bed, or to step over it, in his sleep; and over and over again, when the veteran had reported the fact the next morning, his master had declined to believe him. As the old sailor now stood, staring in vacant inquiry at the bedchamber door, these incidents of the past rose confusedly on his memory, and forced on him the serious question, whether the admiral had left his room during the earlier hours of the night? If by any mischance the sleep-walking fit had seized him, the slippers in old Mazey's hand pointed straight to the conclusion that followed—his master must have passed barefoot in the cold night, over the stone stairs and passages of St. Crux. 'Lord send he's been quiet!' muttered old Mazey, daunted, bold as he was and drunk as he was, by the bare contemplation of that prospect. 'If his honour's been walking to-night, it will be the death of him!'

He roused himself for the moment, by main force—strong in his dog-like fidelity to the admiral, though strong in nothing else—and fought off the stupor of the drink. He looked at the bed, with steadier eyes, and a clearer

mind. Magdalen's precaution in returning it to its customary position, presented it to him necessarily in the aspect of a bed which had never been moved from its place. He next examined the counterpane carefully. Not the faintest vestige appeared of the indentation which must have been left by footsteps passing over it. There was the plain evidence before him—the evidence recognizable at last by his own bewildered eyes—that the admiral had never moved from his room. 'I'll take the Pledge to-morrow!' mumbled old Mazey, in an outburst of grateful relief. The next moment the fumes of the liquor flowed back insidiously over his brain; and the veteran, returning to his customary remedy, paced the passage in zigzag as usual, and kept watch on the deck of an imaginary ship.

Soon after sunrise, Magdalen suddenly heard the grating of the key from outside, in the lock of the door. The door opened, and old Mazey reappeared on the threshold. The first fever of his intoxication had cooled, with time, into a mild penitential glow. He breathed harder than ever, in a succession of low growls, and wagged his venerable head at his own delinquencies, without intermission.

'How are you now, you young land-shark in petticoats?' inquired the old sailor. 'Has your conscience been quiet enough to let you go to sleep?'

'I have not slept,' said Magdalen, drawing back from him in doubt of what he might do next. 'I have no remembrance of what happened after you locked the door—I think I must have fainted. Don't frighten me again, Mr. Mazey! I feel miserably weak and ill. What do you want?'

'I want to say something serious,' replied old Mazey, with impenetrable solemnity. 'It's been on my mind to come here, and make a clean breast of it, for the last hour or more. Mark my words, young woman. I'm going to disgrace myself.'

Magdalen drew further and further back, and looked at him in rising alarm.

'I know my duty to his honour the admiral,' proceeded old Mazey, waving his hand drearily in the direction of his master's door. 'But, try as hard as I may, I can't find it in my heart, you young jade, to be witness against you. I liked the make of you (specially about the waist) when you first came into the house, and I can't help liking the make of you still—though you *have* committed burglary, and though you *are* as crooked as Sin. I've cast the eyes of indulgence on fine-grown girls all my fife—and it's too late in the day to cast die eyes of severity on 'em now. I'm seventy-seven, or seventy-eight, I don't rightly know which. I'm a battered old hulk, with my seams opening, and my pumps choked, and the waters of Death {lowering in on me as fast as they can. I'm as miserable a sinner as you'll meet with anywhere in these parts—Thomas Nagle, the cobbler, only excepted; and he's worse than I am, for he's the youngest of the two, and he ought to know better. But the long and the short of it is, I shall go down to my grave, with an eye of indulgence for a fine-grown girl. More shame for me, you young Jezabel—more shame for me!'

The veteran's unmanageable eyes began to leer again in spite of him, as he concluded his harangue in these terms: the last reserves of austerity left in his face, entrenched themselves dismally round the corners of his mouth. Magdalen approached him again, and tried to speak. He solemnly motioned her back, with another dreary wave of his hand.

'No carneying!'* said old Mazey; 'I'm bad enough already, without that. It's my duty to make my report to his honour the admiral; and I *will* make it. But if you like to give the house the slip, before the burglary's reported, and the court of inquiry begins—I'll disgrace myself by letting you go. It's market morning at Ossory; and Dawkes will be driving the fight cart over, in a quarter of an hour's time. Dawkes will take you, if I ask him. I know my duty—my duty is to turn the key on you, and see Dawkes damned first. But I can't find it in my heart

to be hard on a fine girl like you. It's bred in the bone, and it wunt come out of the flesh. More shame for me, I tell you again—more shame for me!'

The proposal thus strangely and suddenly presented to her, took Magdalen completely by surprise. She had been far too seriously shaken by the events of the night, to be capable of deciding on any subject at a moment's notice. 'You are very good to me, Mr. Mazey,' she said. 'May I have a minute by myself to think?'

'Yes, you may,' replied the veteran, facing about forthwith, and leaving the room. 'They're all alike,' proceeded old Mazey, with his head still running on the sex. 'Whatever you offer 'em, they always want something more. Tall and short, native and foreign, sweethearts and wives—they're all alike!'

Left by herself, Magdalen reached her decision, with far less difficulty than she had anticipated.

If she remained in the house, there were only two courses before her—to charge old Mazey with speaking under the influence of a drunken delusion, or to submit to circumstances. Though she owed to the old sailor her defeat in the very hour of success, his consideration for her at that moment, forbade the idea of defending herself at his expense—even supposing, what was in the last degree improbable, that the defence would be credited. In the second of the two cases (the case of submission to circumstances), but one result could be expected—instant dismissal; and perhaps, discovery as well. What object was to be gained by braving that degradation—by leaving the house, publicly disgraced in the eyes of the servants who had hated and distrusted her from the first? The accident which had literally snatched the Trust from her possession when she had it in her hand, was irreparable. The one apparent compensation under the disaster—in other words, thé discovery that the Trust actually existed, and that George Bartram's marriage within a given time, was one of the objects contained in it—was a compensation which could only be estimated at its true value, by placing it under the fight of Mr. Loscombe's experience. Every motive of which she was conscious, was a motive which urged her to leave the house secretly, while the chance was at her disposal. She looked out into the passage, and called softly to old Mazey to come back.

'I accept your offer thankfully, Mr. Mazey,' she said. 'You don't know what hard measure you dealt out to me, when you took that letter from my hand. But you did your duty—and I can be grateful to you for sparing me this morning, hard as you were upon me last night. I am not such a bad girl as you think me—I am not indeed.'

Old Mazey dismissed the subject, with another dreary wave of his hand.

'Let it be,' said the veteran; 'let it be! It makes no difference, my girl, to such an old rascal as I am. If you were fifty times worse than you are, I should let you go all the same. Put on your bonnet and shawl, and come along. I'm a disgrace to myself and a warning to others—that's what I am. No luggage, mind! Leave all your rattle-traps behind you: to be overhauled, if necessary, at his honour the admiral's discretion. I can be hard enough on your boxes, you young Jezabel; if I can't be hard on *you.'*

With those words, old Mazey led the way out of the room. 'The less I see of her the better—especially about the waist,' he said to himself, as he hobbled down-stairs with the help of the banisters.

The cart was standing in the back-yard, when they reached the lower regions of the house; and Dawkes (otherwise the farm-bailiff's man) was fastening the last buckle of the horse's harness. The hoar frost of the morning was still white in the shade. The sparkling points of it glistened brightly on the shaggy coats of Brutus and Cassius, as they idled about the yard, waiting, with steaming mouths and slowly-wagging tails, to see the cart drive off. Old Mazey went out alone, and used his influence with Dawkes, who, staring in stolid amazement, put a leather-cushion on the cart-seat for his fellow-traveller. Shivering in the sharp morning air, Magdalen waited, while the preliminaries of departure were in progress, conscious of nothing but a giddy

bewilderment of thought, and a helpless suspension of feeling. The events of the night confused themselves hideously, with the trivial circumstances passing before her eyes in the court-yard. She started with the sudden terror of the night, when old Mazey reappeared to summon her out to the cart. She trembled with the helpless confusion of the night, when the veteran cast the eyes of indulgence on her for the last time, and gave her a kiss on the cheek at parting. The next minute, she felt him help her into the cart, and pat her on the back. The next, she heard him tell her in a confidential whisper that, sitting or standing, she was as straight as a poplar, either way. Then there was a pause, in which nothing was said, and nothing done; and then the driver took the reins in hand, and mounted to his place.

She roused herself at the parting moment, and looked back. The last sight she saw at St. Crux, was old Mazey wagging his head in the court-yard, with his fellow-profligates, the dogs, keeping time to him with their tails. The last words she heard, were the words in which the veteran paid his farewell tribute to her charms:—

‘Burglary, or no burglary,’ said old Mazey, ‘she’s a fine-grown girl, if ever there was a fine one yet. What a pity! what a pity!’

the end of the seventh scene

Between the Scenes

Progress of the Story through the Post

Wilkie Collins

I. *From George Bertram to Admiral Bartram*

‘London, April 3rd, 1848.

‘My dear Uncle,

‘One hasty line, to inform you of a temporary obstacle, which we neither of us anticipated when we took leave of each other at St. Crux. While I was wasting the last days of the week at the Grange, the Tyrrels must have been making their arrangements for leaving London. I have just come from Portland Place. The house is shut up; and the family (Miss Vanstone, of course, included) left England yesterday, to pass the season in Paris.

‘Pray don’t let yourself be annoyed by this little check at starting. It is of no serious importance whatever. I have got the address at which the Tyrrels are living; and I mean to cross the Channel, after them, by the mail to-night. I shall find my opportunity in Paris, just as soon as I could have found it in London. The grass shall not grow under my feet, I promise you. For once in my life, I will take Time as fiercely by the forelock, as if I was the most impetuous man in England—and, rely on it, the moment I know the result, you shall know the result too.

‘Affectionately yours,

‘George Bartram.’

II. *From George Bartram to Miss Garth*

‘Paris, April 13th.

‘Dear Miss Garth,

‘I have just written, with a heavy heart, to my uncle; and I think I owe it to your kind interest in me, not to omit writing next to you.

‘You will feel for my disappointment, I am sure, when I tell you, in the fewest and plainest words, that Miss Vanstone has refused me.

‘My vanity may have grievously misled me; but I confess I expected a very different result. My vanity may be misleading me still—for I must acknowledge to you privately, that I think Miss Vanstone was sorry to refuse me. The reason she gave for her decision—no doubt a sufficient reason in her estimation—did not at the time, and does not now, seem sufficient to *me*. She spoke in the sweetest and kindest manner; but she firmly declared that “her family misfortunes” left her no honourable alternative, but to think of my own interests, as I had not thought of them myself—and gratefully to decline accepting my offer.

‘She was so painfully agitated that I could not venture to plead my own cause, as I might otherwise have pleaded it. At the first attempt I made to touch the personal question, she entreated me to spare her, and abruptly left the room. I am still ignorant whether I am to interpret the “family misfortunes” which have set up this barrier between us, as meaning the misfortune for which her parents alone are to blame—or the misfortune of her having such a woman as Mrs. Noel Vanstone for her sister In whichever of these circumstances the obstacle lies, it is no obstacle in my estimation. Can nothing remove it? Is there no hope? Forgive me for asking these questions. I cannot bear up against my bitter disappointment. Neither she, nor you, nor any one but myself, can know how I love her.

‘Ever most truly yours,

‘George Bartram.

‘P.S.—I shall leave for England in a day or two, passing through London, on my way to St. Crux. There are family reasons, connected with the hateful subject of money, which make me look forward, with anything but pleasure, to my next interview with my uncle. If you address your letter to Long’s Hotel, it will be sure to reach me.’

III. From Miss Garth to George Bartram

‘Westmoreland House, April 16th.

‘Dear Mr. Bartram,

‘You only did me justice in supposing that your letter would distress me. If you had supposed that it would make me excessively angry as well, you would not have been far wrong. I have no patience with the pride and perversity of the young women of the present day.

‘I have heard from Norah. It is a long letter, stating the particulars in full detail. I am now going to put all the confidence in your honour and your discretion which I really feel. For your sake, and for Norah’s, I am going to let you know what the scruple really is, which has misled her into the pride and folly of refusing you. I am old enough to speak out; and I can tell you, if she had only been wise enough to let her own wishes guide her, she would have said, Yes—and gladly too.

‘The original cause of all the mischief, is no less a person than your worthy uncle—Admiral Bartram.

‘It seems that the admiral took it into his head (I suppose during your absence) to go to London by himself; and to satisfy some curiosity of his own about Norah, by calling in Portland Place, under pretence of renewing his old friendship with the Tyrrels. He came at luncheon-time, and saw Norah; and, from all I can hear, was apparently better pleased with her than he expected or wished to be when he came into the house.

‘So far, this is mere guess-work—but it is unluckily certain that he and Mrs. Tyrrel had some talk together alone when luncheon was over. Your name was not mentioned; but when their conversation fell on Norah, you were in both their minds, of course. The admiral (doing her full justice personally) declared himself smitten with pity for her hard lot in life. The scandalous conduct of her sister must always stand (he feared) in the way of her future advantage. Who could marry her, without first making it a condition that she and her sister were to be absolute strangers to each other? And even then, the objection would remain—the serious objection to the husband’s family—of being connected by marriage with such a woman as Mrs. Noel Vanstone. It was very sad; it was not the poor girl’s fault—but it was none the less true that her sister was her rock ahead in life. So he ran on, with no real ill-feeling towards Norah, but with an obstinate belief in his own prejudices, which bore the aspect of ill-feeling, and which people with more temper than judgment would be but too readily disposed to resent accordingly.

‘Unfortunately, Mrs. Tyrrel is one of those people. She is an excellent, warm-hearted woman, with a quick temper and very little judgment; strongly attached to Norah, and heartily interested in Norah’s welfare. From all I can learn, she first resented the expression of the admiral’s opinion, in his presence, as worldly and selfish in the last degree; and then interpreted it behind his back, as a hint to discourage his nephew’s visits, which was a downright insult offered to a lady in her own house. This was foolish enough so far—but worse folly was to come.

‘As soon as your uncle was gone, Mrs. Tyrrel, most unwisely and improperly, sent for Norah; and repeating the conversation that had taken place, warned her of the reception she might expect from the man who stood towards you in the position of a father, if she accepted an offer of marriage on your part. When I tell you that Norah’s faithful attachment to her sister still remains unshaken, and that there lies hidden under her noble submission to the unhappy circumstances of her life, a proud susceptibility to slights of all kinds, which is deeply seated in her nature—you will understand the true motive of the refusal which has so naturally and so justly disappointed you. They are all three equally to blame in this matter. Your uncle was wrong to state his objections so roundly and inconsiderately as he did. Mrs. Tyrrel was wrong to let her temper get the better of her, and to suppose herself insulted where no insult was intended. And Norah was wrong to place a scruple of pride, and a hopeless belief in her sister which no strangers can be expected to share, above the higher claims of an attachment which might have secured the happiness and the prosperity of her future life.

‘But the mischief has been done. The next question is—can the harm be remedied?

‘I hope and believe it can. My advice is this:—Don’t take No for an answer. Give her time enough to reflect on what she has done, and to regret it (as I believe she will regret it) in secret—trust to my influence over her to plead your cause for you at every opportunity I can find—wait patiently for the right moment—and ask her again. Men, being accustomed to act on reflection themselves, are a great deal too apt to believe that women act on reflection too. Women do nothing of the sort. They act on impulse—and, in nine cases out of ten, they are heartily sorry for it afterwards.

‘In the mean while, you must help your own interests, by inducing your uncle to alter his opinion—or at least to make the concession of keeping his opinion to himself. Mrs. Tyrrel has rushed to the conclusion, that the harm he has done, he did intentionally—which is as much as to say, in so many words, that he had a prophetic conviction, when he came into the house, of what she would do when he left it. My explanation of the matter is a much simpler one. I believe that the knowledge of your attachment naturally aroused his curiosity to see the object of it, and that Mrs. Tyrrel’s injudicious praises of Norah irritated his objections into openly declaring themselves. Any way, your course lies equally plain before you. Use your influence over your uncle to persuade him into setting matters right again; trust my settled resolution to see Norah your wife, before six months more

are over our heads; and believe me, your friend and well-wisher,

‘Harriet Garth,’

IV. *From Mrs. Drake to George Bartram*

‘St. Crux, April 17th.

‘Sir,

‘I direct these lines to the hotel you usually stay at in London; hoping that you may return soon enough from foreign parts to receive my letter without delay.

‘I am sorry to say that some unpleasant events have taken place at St. Crux, since you left it, and that my honoured master, the admiral, is far from enjoying his usual good health. On both these accounts, I venture to write to you, on my own responsibility—for I think your presence is needed in the house.

‘Early in the month, a most regretable circumstance took place. Our new parlour-maid was discovered by Mr. Mazey, at a late hour of the night (with her master’s basket of keys in her possession), prying into the private documents kept in the east library. The girl removed herself from the house, the next morning, before we were any of us astir, and she has not been heard of since. This event has annoyed and alarmed my master very seriously; and to make matters worse, on the day when the girl’s treacherous conduct was discovered, the admiral was seized with the first symptoms of a severe inflammatory cold. He was not himself aware, nor was any one else, how he had caught the chill. The doctor was sent for, and kept the inflammation down until the day before yesterday—when it broke out again, under circumstances which I am sure you will be sorry to hear, as I am truly sorry to write of them.

‘On the date I have just mentioned—I mean the fifteenth of the month—my master himself informed me that he had been dreadfully disappointed by a letter received from you, which had come in the morning from foreign parts, and had brought him bad news. He did not tell me what the news was—but I have never, in all the years I have passed in the admiral’s service, seen him so distressingly upset, and so unlike himself, as he was on that day. At night his uneasiness seemed to increase. He was in such a state of irritation, that he could not bear the sound of Mr. Mazey’s hard breathing outside his door; and he laid his positive orders on the old man to go into one of the bedrooms for that night. Mr. Mazey, to his own great regret, was of course obliged to obey.

‘Our only means of preventing the admiral from leaving his room in his sleep, if the fit unfortunately took him, being now removed, Mr. Mazey and I agreed to keep watch by turns through the night—sitting with the door ajar, in one of the empty rooms near our master’s bed-chamber. We could think of nothing better to do than this—knowing he would not allow us to lock him in; and not having the door-key in our possession, even if we could have ventured to secure him in his room without his permission. I kept watch for the first two hours, and then Mr. Mazey took my place. After having been some little time in my own room, it occurred to me that the old man was hard of hearing, and that if his eyes grew at all heavy in the night, his ears were not to be trusted to warn him, if anything happened. I slipped on my clothes again, and went back to Mr. Mazey. He was neither asleep nor awake—he was between the two. My mind misgave me, and I went on to the admiral’s room. The door was open, and the bed was empty.

‘Mr. Mazey and I went down-stairs instandy. We looked in all the north rooms, one after another, and found no

traces of him. I thought of the drawing-room next, and, being the most active of the two, went first to examine it. The moment I turned the sharp corner of the passage, I saw my master coming towards me through the open drawing-room door, asleep and dreaming, with his keys in his hands. The sliding-door behind him was open also; and the fear came to me then, and has remained with me ever since, that his dream had led him through the Banqueting-Hall, into the east rooms. We abstained from waking him, and followed his steps, until he returned of his own accord to his bed-chamber. The next morning, I grieve to say, all the bad symptoms came back; and none of the remedies employed have succeeded in getting the better of them yet. By the doctor's advice, we refrained from telling the admiral what had happened. He is still under the impression that he passed the night as usual in his own room.

'I have been careful to enter into all the particulars of this unfortunate accident, because neither Mr. Mazey nor myself desire to screen ourselves from blame, if blame we have deserved. We both acted for the best, and we both beg and pray you will consider our responsible situation, and come as soon as possible to St. Crux. Our honoured master is very hard to manage; and the doctor thinks, as we do, that your presence is wanted in the house.

'I remain, sir, with Mr. Mazey's respects and my own, your humble servant,

'Sophia Drake.'

V. *From George Bartram to Miss Garth*

'St. Crux, April 22nd.

'Dear Miss Garth,

'Pray excuse my not thanking you sooner for your kind and consoling letter. We are in sad trouble at St. Crux. Any litde irritation I might have felt at my poor uncle's unlucky interference in Portland Place, is all forgotten in the misfortune of his serious illness. He is suffering from internal inflammation, produced by cold; and symptoms have shown themselves which are dangerous at his age. A physician from London is now in the house. You shall hear more in a few days. Meantime, believe me, with sincere gratitude,

'Yours most truly,

'George Bartram.'

VI. *From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone*

'Lincoln's Inn Fields, May 6th.

'Dear Madam,

'I have unexpectedly received some information which is of the most vital importance to your interests. The news of Admiral Bartram's death has reached me this morning. He expired at his own house, on the fourth of the present month.

‘This event at once disposes of the considerations which I had previously endeavoured to impress on you, in relation to your discovery at St. Crux. The wisest course we can now follow, is to open communications at once with the executors of the deceased gentleman; addressing them through the medium of the admiral’s legal adviser, in the first instance.

‘I have despatched a letter this day to the solicitor in question. It simply warns him that we have lately become aware of the existence of a private Document, controlling the deceased gendeman in his use of the legacy devised to him by Mr. Noel Vanstone’s will. My letter assumes that the document will be easily found among the admiral’s papers; and it mentions that I am the solicitor appointed by Mrs. Noel Vanstone to receive communications on her behalf. My object in taking this step, is to cause a search to be instituted for the Trust—in the very probable event of the executors not having met with it yet—before the usual measures are adopted for the administration of the admiral’s estate. We will threaten legal proceedings, if we find that the object does not succeed. But I anticipate no such necessity. Admiral Bartram’s executors must be men of high standing and position; and they will do justice to you and to themselves in this matter, by looking for the Trust.

‘Under these circumstances, you will naturally ask—“What are our prospects when the document is found?” Our prospects have a bright side, and a dark side. Let us take the bright side to begin with.

‘What do we actually know?

‘We know, first, that the Trust does really exist. Secondly, that there is a provision in it, relating to the marriage of Mr. George Bartram in a given time. Thirdly, that the time (six months from the date of your husband’s death) expired on the third of this month. Fourthly, that Mr. George Bartram (as I have found out by inquiry, in the absence of any positive information on the subject possessed by yourself) is, at the present moment, a single man. The conclusion naturally follows, that the object contemplated by the Trust, in this case, is an object that has failed.

‘If no other provisions have been inserted in the document—or if, being inserted, those other provisions should be discovered to have failed also—I believe it to be impossible (especially if evidence can be found that the admiral himself considered the Trust binding on him) for the executors to deal with your husband’s fortune as legally forming part of Admiral Bartram’s estate. The legacy is expressly declared to have been left to him, on the understanding that he applies it to certain stated objects—and those objects have failed. What is to be done with the money? It was not left to the admiral himself, on the testator’s own showing; and the purposes for which it *was* left, have not been, and cannot be, carried out. I believe (if the case here supposed really happens), that the money must revert to the testator’s estate. In that event, the Law, dealing with it as a matter of necessity, divides it into two equal portions. One half goes to Mr. Noel Vanstone’s childless widow; and the other half is divided among Mr. Noel Vanstone’s next-of-kin.

‘You will no doubt discover the obvious objection to the case in our favour, as I have here put it. You will see that it depends for its practical realization, not on one contingency, but on a series of contingencies, which must all happen exactly as we wish them to happen. I admit the force of the objection—but I can tell you, at the same time, that these said contingencies are by no means so improbable as they may look on the face of them.

‘We have every reason to believe that the Trust, like the Will, was *not* drawn by a lawyer. That is one circumstance in our favour—that is enough of itself to cast a doubt on the soundness of all, or any, of the remaining provisions which we may not be acquainted with. Another chance which we may count on, is to be found, as I think, in that strange handwriting, placed under the signature on the third page of the Letter, which you saw, but which you unhappily omitted to read. All the probabilities point to those lines as written by Admiral Bartram; and the position which they occupy is certainly consistent with the theory that they touch the

important subject of his own sense of obligation under the Trust.

‘I wish to raise no false hopes in your mind. I only desire to satisfy you that we have a case worth trying.

‘As for the dark side of the prospect, I need not enlarge on it. After what I have already written, you will understand that the existence of a sound provision, unknown to us, in the Trust, which has been properly carried out by the admiral—or which can be properly carried out by his representatives—would be necessarily fatal to our hopes. The legacy would be, in this case, devoted to the purpose or purposes contemplated by your husband —and,, from that moment, you would have no claim.

‘I have only to add, that as soon as I hear from the late admiral’s man of business, you shall know the result.

‘Believe me, dear madam,

‘Faithfully yours,

‘John Losgombe.’

VII. *From George Bartram to Miss Garth*

‘St. Crux, May 15th.

‘Dear Miss Garth,

‘I trouble you with another letter: partly to thank you for your kind expression of sympathy with me, under the loss that I have sustained; and partly to tell you of an extraordinary application made to my uncle’s executors, in which you and Miss Vanstone may both feel interested, as Mrs. Noel Vanstone is directly concerned in it.

‘Knowing my own ignorance of legal technicalities, I enclose a copy of the application, instead of trying to describe it. You will notice, as suspicious, that no explanation is given of the manner in which the alleged discovery of one of my uncle’s secrets was made, by persons who are total strangers to him.

‘On being made acquainted with the circumstances, the executors at once applied to me. I could give them no positive information—ifor my uncle never consulted me on matters of business. But I felt in honour bound to tell them, that during the last six months of his life, the admiral had occasionally let fall expressions of impatience in my hearing, which led to the conclusion that he was annoyed by a private responsibility of some kind. I also mentioned that he had imposed a very strange condition on me—a condition which, in spite of his own assurances to the contrary, I was persuaded could not have emanated from himself—of marrying within a given time (which time has now expired), or of not receiving from him a certain sum of money, which I believed to be the same in amount as the sum bequeathed to him in my cousin’s will. The executors agreed with me that these circumstances gave a colour of probability to an otherwise incredible story; and they decided that a search should be instituted for the Secret Trust—nothing in the slightest degree resembling this same Trust having been discovered, up to that time, among the admiral’s papers.

‘The search (no trifle in such a house as this) has now been in full progress for a week. It is superintended by both the executors, and by my uncle’s lawyer—who is personally, as well as professionally, known to Mr. Loscombe (Mrs. Noel Vanstone’s solicitor), and who has been included in the proceedings at the express request of Mr. Loscombe himself. Up to this time, nothing whatever has been found. Thousands and thousands

of letters have been examined—and not one of them bears the remotest resemblance to the letter we are looking for.

‘Another week will bring the search to an end. It is only at my express request that it will be persevered with so long. But as the admiral’s generosity has made me sole heir to everything he possessed, I feel bound to do the fullest justice to the interests of others, however hostile to myself those interests may be.

‘With this view, I have not hesitated to reveal to the lawyer, a constitutional peculiarity of my poor uncle’s, which was always kept a secret among us at his own request—I mean his tendency to somnambulism. I mentioned that he had been discovered (by the housekeeper and his old servant), walking in his sleep, about three weeks before his death, and that the part of the house in which he had been seen, and the basket of keys which he was carrying in his hand, suggested the inference that he had come from one of the rooms in the east wing, and that he might have opened some of the pieces of furniture in one of them. I surprised the lawyer (who seemed to be quite ignorant of the extraordinary actions constantly performed by somnambulists), by informing him that my uncle could find his way about the house, lock and unlock doors, and remove objects of all kinds from one place to another, as easily in his sleep, as in his waking hours. And I declared that, while I felt the faintest doubt in my own mind whether he might not have been dreaming of the Trust on the night in question, and putting the dream in action in his sleep, I should not feel satisfied unless the rooms in the east wing were searched again.

‘It is only right to add that there is not the least foundation in fact for this idea of mine. During the latter part of his fatal illness, my poor uncle was quite incapable of speaking on any subject whatever. From the time of my arrival at St. Crux, in the middle of last month, to the time of his death, not a word dropped from him which referred in the remotest way to the Secret Trust.

‘Here then, for the present, the matter rests. If you think it right to communicate the contents of this letter to Miss Vanstone, pray tell her that it will not be my fault if her sister’s assertion (however preposterous it may seem to my uncle’s executors) is not fairly put to the proof.

‘Believe me, dear Miss Garth,

‘Always truly yours,

‘George Bartram.

‘P.S.—As soon as all business matters are settled, I am going abroad for some months, to try the relief of change of scene. The house will be shut up, and left under the charge of Mrs. Drake. I have not forgotten your once telling me that you should like to see St. Crux, if you ever found yourself in this neighbourhood. If you are at all likely to be in Essex, during the time when I am abroad, I have provided against the chance of your being disappointed, by leaving instructions with Mrs. Drake to give you, and any friends of yours, the freest admission to the house and grounds.’

VIII. *From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Noel Vanstone*

‘Lincoln’s Inn Fields, May 24th.

‘Dear Madam,

‘After a whole fortnight’s search—conducted, I am bound to admit, with the most conscientious and unrelaxing care—no such document as the Secret Trust has been found among the papers left at St. Crux by the late Admiral Bartram.

‘Under these circumstances, the executors have decided on acdng under the only recognizable authority which they have to guide them—the admiral’s own will. This document (executed some years since) bequeaths the whole of his estate, both real and personal (that is to say, all the lands he possesses, and all the money he possesses, at the time of his death), to his nephew. The will is plain, and the result is inevitable. Your husband’s fortune is lost to you from this moment. Mr. George Bartram legally inherits it, as he legally inherits the house and estate of St. Crux.

‘I make no comment upon this extraordinary close to the proceedings. The Trust may have been destroyed, or the Trust may be hidden in some place of concealment, inaccessible to discovery. Either way, it is, in my opinion, impossible to found any valid legal declaration on a knowledge of the document, so fragmentary and so incomplete, as the knowledge which you possess. If other lawyers differ from me on this point, by all means consult them. I have devoted money enough and time enough to the unfortunate attempt to assert your interests; and my connection with the matter, must, from this moment, be considered at an end.

‘Your obedient servant,

‘John Loscombe.’

IX. *From Mrs. Ruddock (Lodging-House Keeper) to Mr. Loscombe*

‘Park Terrace, St John’s Wood,

June 2nd.

‘Sir,

‘Having, by Mrs. Noel Vanstone’s directions, taken letters for her to the post, addressed to you—and knowing no one else to apply to—I beg to inquire whether you are acquainted with any of her friends; for I think it right that they should be stirred up to take some steps about her.

‘Mrs. Vanstone first came to me in November last, when she and her maid occupied my apartments. On that occasion, and again on this, she has given me no cause to complain of her. She has behaved like a lady, and paid me my due. I am writing, as a mother of a family, under a sense of responsibility—I am not writing with an interested motive.

‘After proper warning given, Mrs. Vanstone (who is now quite alone) leaves me to-morrow. She has not concealed from me that her circumstances are fallen very low, and that she cannot afford to remain in my house. This is all she has told me—I know nothing of where she is going, or what she means to do next. But I have every reason to believe she desires to destroy all traces by which she might be found, after leaving this place—for I discovered her in tears yesterday, burning letters which were doubdess letters from her friends. In looks and conduct she has altered most shockingly in the last week. I believe there is some dreadful trouble on her mind—and I am afraid, from what I see of her, that she is on the eve of a serious illness. It is very sad to see

such a young woman, so utterly deserted and friendless as she is now.

‘Excuse my troubling you with this letter; it is on my conscience to write it. If you know any of her relations, please warn them that time is not to be wasted. If they lose to-morrow, they may lose the last chance of finding her.

‘Your humble servant,

‘Catherine Ruddock.’

X. *From Mr. Loscombe to Mrs. Ruddock*

‘Lincoln’s Inn Fields, June 2nd.

‘Madam,

‘My only connection with Mrs. Noel Vanstone was a professional one—and that connection is now at an end. I am not acquainted with any of her friends; and I cannot undertake to interfere personally, either with her present or future proceedings.

‘Regretting my inability to afford you any assistance, I remain, your obedient servant,

‘John Loscombe.’

The Last Scene

*Aaron's Buildings**

Wilkie Collins

Chapter I

On the seventh of June, the owners of the merchantman, Deliverance, received news that the ship had touched at Plymouth to land passengers, and had then continued her homeward voyage to the Port of London. Five days later, the vessel was in the river, and was towed into the East India Docks.

Having transacted the business on shore for which he was personally responsible, Captain Kirke made the necessary arrangements by letter, for visiting his brother-in-law's parsonage in Suffolk, on the seventeenth of the month. As usual, in such cases, he received a list of commissions to execute for his sister on the day before he left London. One of these commissions took him into the neighbourhood of Camden Town. He drove to his destination from the Docks; and then, dismissing the vehicle, set forth to walk back southward, towards the New Road.

He was not well acquainted with the district; and his attention wandered, farther and farther away from the scene around him, as he went on. His thoughts, roused by the prospect of seeing his sister again, had led his memory back to the night when he had parted from her, leaving the house on foot. The spell so strangely laid on him, in that past time, had kept its hold through all after-events. The face that had haunted him on the lonely road, had haunted him again on the lonely sea. The woman who had followed him, as in a dream, to his sister's door, had followed him—thought of his thought, and spirit of his spirit—to the deck of his ship. Through storm and calm on the voyage out, through storm and calm on the voyage home, she had been with him. In the ceaseless turmoil of the London streets, she was with him now. He knew what the first question on his lips would be, when he had seen his sister and her boys. 'I shall try to talk of something else,' he thought; 'but when Lizzie and I are alone, it will come out in spite of me.'

The necessity of waiting to let a string of carts pass at a turning, before he crossed, awakened him to present things. He looked about in a momentary confusion. The street was strange to him; he had lost his way.

The first foot-passenger of whom he inquired, appeared to have no time to waste in giving information. Hurriedly directing him to cross to the other side of the road, to turn down the first street he came to on his right hand, and then to ask again, the stranger unceremoniously hastened on without waiting to be thanked.

Kirke followed his directions, and took the turning on his right. The street was short and narrow, and the houses on either side were of the poorer order. He looked up as he passed the corner, to see what the name of the place

might be. It was called ‘Aaron’s Buildings.’

Low down on the side of the ‘Buildings’ along which he was walking, a little crowd of idlers was assembled round two cabs, both drawn up before the door of the same house. Kirke advanced to the crowd, to ask his way of any civil stranger among them, who might *not* be in a hurry this time. On approaching the cabs, he found a woman disputing with the drivers; and heard enough to inform him that two vehicles had been sent for by mistake, where one only was wanted.

The house-door was open; and when he turned that way next, he looked easily into the passage, over the heads of the people in front of him.

The sight that met his eyes should have been shielded in pity from the observation of the street. He saw a slatternly girl, with a frightened face, standing by an old chair placed in the middle of the passage, and holding a woman on the chair, too weak and helpless to support herself—a woman apparently in the last stage of illness, who was about to be removed, when the dispute outside was ended, in one of the cabs. Her head was drooping, when he first saw her, and an old shawl which covered it, had fallen forward so as to hide the upper part of her face.

Before he could look away again, the girl in charge of her, raised her head, and restored the shawl to its place. The action disclosed her face to view, for an instant only, before her head drooped once more on her bosom. In that instant, he saw the woman whose beauty was the haunting remembrance of his life—whose image had been vivid in his mind, not five minutes since.

The shock of the double recognition—the recognition, at the same moment, of the face, and of the dreadful change in it—struck him speechless and helpless. The steady presence of mind in all emergencies which had become a habit of his life, failed him for the first time. The poverty-stricken street, the squalid mob round the door, swam before his eyes. He staggered back, and caught at the iron-railings of the house behind him.

‘Where are they taking her to?’ he heard a woman ask, close at his side.

‘To the hospital, if they will have her,’ was the reply. ‘And to the workhouse, if they won’t.’

That horrible answer roused him. He pushed his way through the crowd, and entered the house.

The misunderstanding on the pavement had been set right; and one of the cabs had driven off. As he crossed the threshold of the door, he confronted the people of the house at the moment when they were moving her. The cabman who had remained, was on one side of the chair, and the woman who had been disputing with the two drivers was on the other. They were just lifting her, when Kirke’s tall figure darkened the door.

‘What are you doing with that lady?’ he asked.

The cabman looked up with the insolence of his reply visible in his eyes, before his lips could utter it. But the woman, quicker than he, saw the suppressed agitation in Kirke’s face, and dropped her hold of the chair in an instant.

‘Do you know her, sir?’ asked the woman, eagerly. ‘Are you one of her friends?’

‘Yes,’ said Kirke, without hesitation.

‘It’s not my fault, sir,’ pleaded the woman, shrinking under the look he fixed on her. ‘I would have waited patiently till her friends found her—I would indeed!’

Kirke made no reply. He turned, and spoke to the cabman.

‘Go out,’ he said, ‘and close the door after you. I’ll send you down your money direcdy. What room in the house did you take her from, when you brought her here?’ he resumed, addressing himself to the woman again.

‘The first floor back, sir.’

‘Show me the way to it.’

He stooped, and lifted Magdalen in his arms. Her head rested gently on the sailor’s breast; her eyes looked up wonderingly into the sailor’s face. She smiled and whispered to him vacandy. Her mind had wandered back to old days at home; and her few broken words showed that she fancied herself a child again in her father’s arms. ‘Poor papa!’ she said sofdy. ‘Why do you look so sorry? Poor papa!’

The woman led the way into the back room on the first floor. It was very small; it was miserably furnished. But the litde bed was clean, and the few things in the room were neatly kept. Kirke laid her tenderly on the bed. She caught one of his hands in her burning fingers. ‘Don’t distress mamma about me,’ she said. ‘Send for Norah.’ Kirke tried gently to release his hand; but she only clasped it the more eagerly. He sat down by the bedside to wait until it pleased her to release him. The woman stood looking at them and crying, in a corner of the room. Kirke observed her attentively. ‘Speak,’ he said, after an interval, in low quiet tones. ‘Speak, in *her* presence; and tell me the truth.’

With many words, with many tears, the woman spoke.

She had let her first floor to the lady, a fortnight since. The lady had paid a week’s rent, and had given the name of Gray. She had been out from morning till night, for the first three days, and had come home again, on every occasion, with a wretchedly weary, disappointed look. The woman of the house had suspected that she was in hiding from her friends, under a false name; and that she had been vainly trying to raise money, or to get some employment, on the three days when she was out for so long, and when she looked so disappointed on coming home. However that might be, on the fourth day she had fallen ill, with shivering fits and hot fits, turn and turn about. On the fifth day, she was worse; and on the sixth, she was too sleepy at one time, and too fight-headed at another, to be spoken to. The chemist (who did the doctoring in those parts) had come and looked at her, and had said he thought it was a bad fever. He had left a ‘saline draught,’ which the woman of the house had paid for out of her own pocket, and had administered without effect. She had ventured on searching the only box which the lady had brought with her; and had found nothing in it but a few necessary articles of linen—no dresses, no ornaments, not so much as the fragment of a letter which might help in discovering her friends. Between the risk of keeping her under these circumstances, and the barbarity of turning a sick woman into the street, the landlady herself had not hesitated. She would willingly have kept her tenant, on the chance of the lady’s recovery, and on the chance of friends turning up. But not half an hour since, her husband—who never came near the house, except to take her money—had come to rob her of her little earnings, as usual. She had been obliged to tell him that no rent was in hand for the first floor, and that none was likely to be in hand until the lady recovered, or her friends found her. On hearing this, he had mercilessly insisted—well or ill—that the lady should go. There was the hospital to take her to; and if the hospital shut its doors, there was the workhouse to try next. If she was not out of the place in an hour’s time, he threatened to come back, and take her out himself. His wife knew, but too well, that he was brute enough to be as good as his word; and no other choice had been left her, but to do as she had done, for the sake of the lady herself.

The woman told her shocking story, with every appearance of being honestly ashamed of it. Towards the end, Kirke felt the clasp of the burning fingers slackening round his hand. He looked back at the bed again. Her

weary eyes were closing; and, with her face still turned towards the sailor, she was sinking into sleep.

‘Is there any one in the front room?’ said Kirke, in a whisper. ‘Come in there; I have something to say to you.’

The woman followed him, through the door of communication between the rooms.

‘How much does she owe you?’ he asked.

The landlady mentioned the sum. Kirke put it down before her on the table.

‘Where is your husband?’ was his next question.

‘Waiting at the public-house, sir, till the hour is up.’

‘You can take him the money, or not, as you think right,’ said Kirke quiedy. ‘I have only one thing to tell you, so far as your husband is concerned. If you want to see every bone in his skin broken, let him come to the house while I am in it. Stop! I have something more to say. Do you know of any doctor in the neighbourhood, who can be depended on?’

‘Not in our neighbourhood, sir. But I know of one within half an hour’s walk of us.’

‘Take the cab at the door; and, if you find him at home, bring him back in it. Say I am waiting here for his opinion, on a very serious case. He shall be well paid, and you shall be well paid. Make haste!’

The woman left the room.

Kirke sat down alone, to wait for her return. He hid his face in his hands; and tried to realize the strange and touching situation in which the accident of a moment had placed him.

Hidden in the squalid by-ways of London, under a false name; cast, friendless and helpless, on the mercy of strangers, by illness which had struck her prostrate, mind and body alike—so he met her again, the woman who had opened a new world of beauty to his mind; the woman who had called Love to life in him by a look! What horrible misfortune had struck her so cruelly, and struck her so low? What mysterious destiny had guided him to the last refuge of her poverty and despair, in the hour of her sorest need? ‘If it is ordered that I am to see her again, I *shall* see her.’ Those words came back to him now—the memorable words that he had spoken to his sister at parting. With that thought in his heart, he had gone where his duty called him. Months and months had passed; thousands and thousands of miles, protracting their desolate length on the unresting waters, had rolled between them. And through the lapse of time, and over the waste of oceans—day after day, and night after night, as the winds of heaven blew, and the good ship toiled on before them—he had advanced, nearer and nearer to the end that was waiting for him; he had journeyed blindfold to the meeting on the threshold of that miserable door. ‘What has brought me here?’ he said to himself in a whisper. ‘The mercy of chance? No! The mercy of God.’

He waited, unregardful of the place, unconscious of the time, until the sound of footsteps on the stairs came suddenly between him and his thoughts. The door opened, and the doctor was shown into the room.

‘Dr. Merrick,’ stud the landlady, placing a chair for him.

‘Mr. Merrick,’ said the visitor, smiling quietly as he took the chair. ‘I am not a physician—I am a surgeon in general practice.’*

Physician or surgeon, there was something in his face and manner which told Kirke, at a glance, that he was a

man to be relied on.

After a few preliminary words on either side, Mr. Merrick sent the landlady into the bedroom to see if his patient was awake or asleep. The woman returned, and said she was ‘betwixt the two, light in the head again, and burning hot.’ The doctor went at once into the bedroom, telling the landlady to follow him, and to close the door behind her.

A weary time passed before he came back into the front room. When he reappeared, his face spoke for him, before any question could be asked.

‘Is it a serious illness?’ said Kirke, his voice sinking low, his eyes anxiously fixed on the doctor’s face.

‘It is a *dangerous* illness,’ said Mr. Merrick, with an emphasis on the word.

He drew his chair nearer to Kirke, and looked at him attentively.

‘May I ask you some questions, which are not strictly medical?’ he inquired.

Kirke bowed.

‘Can you tell me what her life has been, before she came into this house, and before she fell ill?’

‘I have no means of knowing. I have just returned to England, after a long absence.’

‘Did you know of her coming here?’

‘I only discovered it by accident.’

‘Has she no female relations? No mother? no sister? no one to take care of her but yourself?’

‘No one—unless I can succeed in tracing her relations. No one but myself.’

Mr. Merrick was silent. He looked at Kirke more attentively than ever. ‘Strange!’ thought the doctor. ‘He is here, in sole charge of her—and is this all he knows?’

Kirke saw the doubt in his face; and addressed himself straight to that doubt, before another word passed between them.

‘I see my position here surprises you,’ he said simply. ‘Will you consider it the position of a relation—the position of her brother or her father—until her friends can be found?’ His voice faltered, and he laid his hand earnestly on the doctor’s arm. ‘I have taken this trust on myself,’ he said: ‘and, as God shall judge me, I will not be unworthy of it!’

The poor weary head lay on his breast again, the poor fevered fingers clasped his hand once more, as he spoke those words.

‘I believe you,’ said the doctor warmly. ‘I believe you are an honest man.—Pardon me if I have seemed to intrude myself on your confidence. I respect your reserve—from this moment, it is sacred to me. In justice to both of us, let me say that the questions I have asked, were not prompted by mere curiosity. No common cause will account for the illness which has laid my patient on that bed. She has suffered some long-continued mental trial, some wearing and terrible suspense—and she has broken down under it. It might have helped me, if I could have known what the nature of the trial was, and how long or how short a time elapsed before she sank under it. In that hope, I spoke.’

‘When you told me she was dangerously ill,’ said Kirke, ‘did you mean danger to her reason, or to her life?’

‘To both,’ replied Mr. Merrick. ‘Her whole nervous system has given way; all the ordinary functions of her brain are in a state of collapse. I can give you no plainer explanation than that of the nature of the malady. The fever which frightens the people of the house, is merely the effect. The cause is what I have told you. She may lie on that bed for weeks to come; passing alternately, without a gleam of consciousness, from a state of delirium to a state of repose. You must not be alarmed if you find her sleep lasting far beyond the natural time. That sleep is a better remedy than any I can give, and nothing must disturb it. All our art can accomplish is to watch hei^—to help her with stimulants from time to time—and to wait for what Nature will do.’

‘Must she remain here? Is there no hope of our being able to remove her to a better place?’

‘No hope whatever, for the present. She has already been disturbed, as I understand—and she is seriously the worse for it. Even if she gets better, even if she comes to herself again, it would still be a dangerous experiment to move her too soon—the least excitement or. alarm would be fatal to her. You must make the best of this place as it is. The landlady has my directions; and I will send a good nurse to help her. There is nothing more to be done. So far as her life can be said to be in any human hands, it is as much in your hands now, as in mine. Everything depends on the care that is taken of her, under your direction, in this house.’ With those farewell words he rose, and quitted the room.

Left by himself, Kirke walked to the door of communication; and knocking at it softly, told the landlady he wished to speak with her.

He was far more composed, far more like his own resolute self, after his interview with the doctor, than he had been before it. A man living in the artificial social atmosphere which *this* man had never breathed, would have felt painfully the worldly side of the situation—its novelty and strangeness; the serious present difficulty in which it placed him; the numberless misinterpretations in the future, to which it might lead. Kirke never gave the situation a thought. He saw nothing but the duty it claimed from him—a duty which the doctor’s farewell words had put plainly before his mind. Everything depended on the care taken of her, under his direction, in that house. There was his responsibility—and he unconsciously acted under it, exactly as he would have acted in a case of emergency with women and children, on board his own ship. He questioned the landlady in short, sharp sentences: the only change in him, was in the lowered tone of his voice, and in the anxious looks which he cast, from time to time, at the room where she lay.

‘Do you understand what the doctor has told you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘The house must be kept quiet. Who lives in the house?’

‘Only me and my daughter, sir; we live in the parlours. Times have gone badly with us, since Lady Day.* Both the rooms above this are to let.’

‘I will take them both, and the two rooms down here as well. Do you know of any active trustworthy man, who can run on errands for me?’

‘Yes, sir. Shall I go———?’

‘No. Let your daughter go. You must not leave the house until the nurse comes. Don’t send the messenger up here. Men of that sort tread heavily—I’ll go down, and speak to him at the door.’

He went down when the messenger came, and sent him first to purchase pen, ink, and paper. The man's next errand despatched him to make inquiries for a person who could provide for deadening the sound of passing wheels in the street, by laying down tan* before the house in the usual way. This object accomplished, the messenger received two letters to post. The first was addressed to Kirke's brother-in-law. It told him, in few, and plain words, what had happened; and left him to break the news to his wife, as he thought best. The second letter was directed to the landlord of the Aid-borough Hotel. Magdalen's assumed name at North Shingles, was the only name by which Kirke knew her; and the one chance of tracing her relatives that he could discern, was the chance of discovering her reputed unde and aunt, by means of inquiries starting from Aldborough.

Towards the close of the afternoon, a decent middle-aged woman came to the house, with a letter from Mr. Merrick. She was well known to the doctor, as a trustworthy and careful person, who had nursed his own wife; and she would be assisted, from time to time, by a lady, who was a member of a religious Sisterhood in the district, and whose compassionate interest had been warmly aroused in the case. Towards eight o'clock, that evening, the doctor himself would call and see that his patient wanted for nothing.

The arrival of the nurse, and the relief of knowing that she was to be trusted, left Kirke free to think of himself. His luggage was ready packed for his contemplated journey to Suffolk, the next day. It was merely necessary to transport it from the hotel to the house in Aaron's Buildings.

He stopped once only on his way to the hotel, to look at a toy-shop in one of the great thoroughfares. The miniature ships in the window reminded him of his nephew. 'My little namesake will be sadly disappointed at not seeing me to-morrow,' he thought. 'I must make it up to the boy, by sending him something from his uncle.' He went into the shop, and bought one of the ships. It was secured in a box, and packed and directed in his presence. He put a card on the deck of the miniature vessel before the cover of the box was nailed on, bearing this inscription:—'A ship for the little sailor, with the big sailor's love.'—'Children like to be written to, ma'am,' he said, apologetically, to the woman behind the counter. 'Send the box as soon as you can—I am anxious the boy should get it to-morrow.'

Towards the dusk of the evening, he returned with his luggage to Aaron's Buildings. He took off his boots in the passage, and carried his trunk up-stairs himself; stopping, as he passed the first floor, to make his inquiries. Mr. Merrick was present to answer them.

'She was awake and wandering,' said the doctor, 'a few minutes since. But we have succeeded in composing her, and she is sleeping now.'

'Have no words escaped her, sir, which might help us to find her friends?'

Mr. Merrick shook his head.

'Weeks and weeks may pass yet,' he said, 'and that poor girl's story may still be a sealed secret to all of us. We can only wait.'

So the day ended—the first of many days that were to come.

Chapter II

The warm sunlight of July shining softly through a green blind; an open window with fresh flowers set on the

sill; a strange bed, in a strange room; a giant figure of the female sex (like a dream of Mrs. Wragge) towering aloft on one side of the bed, and trying to clap its hands; another woman (quickly) stopping the hands before they could make any noise; a mild expostulating voice (like a dream of Mrs. Wragge again) breaking the silence in these words, 'She knows me, ma'am, she knows me; if I mustn't be happy, it will be the death of me!'—such were the first sights, such were the first sounds, to which, after six weeks of oblivion, Magdalen suddenly and strangely awoke.

After a little, the sights grew dim again, and the sounds sank into silence. Sleep, the merciful, took her once more, and hushed her back to repose.

Another day—and the sights were clearer, the sounds were louder. Another—and she heard a man's voice, through the door, asking for news from the sick-room. The voice was strange to her; it was always cautiously lowered to the same quiet tone. It inquired after her, in the morning, when she woke—at noon, when she took her refreshment—in the evening, before she dropped to sleep again. 'Who is so anxious about me?' That was the first thought her mind was strong enough to form:—'Who is so anxious about me?'

More days—and she could speak to the nurse at her bedside; she could answer the questions of an elderly man, who knew far more about her than she knew about herself, and who told her he was Mr. Merrick, the doctor; she could sit up in bed, supported by pillows, wondering what had happened to her, and where she was; she could feel a growing curiosity about that quiet voice, which still asked after her, morning, noon, and night, on the other side of the door.

Another day's delay—and Mr. Merrick asked her if she was strong enough to see an old friend. A meek voice, behind him, articulating high in the air, said, 'It's only me.' The voice was followed by the prodigious bodily apparition of Mrs. Wragge, with her cap all awry, and one of her shoes in the next room. 'Oh, look at her! look at her!' cried Mrs. Wragge, in an ecstacy, dropping on her knees at Magdalen's bedside, with a thump that shook the house. 'Bless her heart, she's well enough to laugh at me already. "Cheer, boys, cheer—!" I beg your pardon, doctor, my conduct isn't ladylike, I know. It's my head, sir; it isn't *me*. I must get vent somehow—or my head will burst!' No coherent sentence, in answer to any sort of question put to her, could be extracted that morning from Mrs. Wragge. She rose from one climax of verbal confusion to another—and finished her visit under the bed, groping inscrutably for the second shoe.

The morrow came—and Mr. Merrick promised that she should see another old friend on the next day. In the evening, when the inquiring voice asked after her, as usual, and when the door was opened a few inches to give the reply, she answered faintly for herself:—'I am better, thank you.' There was a moment of silence—and then, just as the door was shut again, the voice sank to a whisper, and said fervently, 'Thank God!' Who was he? She had asked them all, and no tine would tell her. Who was he?

The next day came; and she heard her door opened softly. Brisk footsteps tripped into the room; a lithe litde figure advanced to the bed-side. Was it a dream again? No! There he was in his own evergreen reality, with the copious flow of language pouring smoothly from his lips; with the lambent dash of humour twinkling in his parti-coloured eyes—there he was, more audacious, more persuasive, more respectable than ever, in a suit of glossy black, with a speckless white cravat, and a rampant shirt-frill—the unblushing, the invincible, unchangeable, Wragge!

'Not a word, my dear girl!' said the captain, seating himself comfortably at the bedside, in his old confidential way. 'I am to do ail the talking; and I think you will own, a more competent man for the purpose could not possibly have been found. I am really delighted—honestly delighted, if I may use such an apparently inappropriate word—to see you again, and to see you getting well. I have often thought of you; I have often

missed you; I have often said to myself—never mind what! Clear the stage, and drop the curtain on the past. *Dum vivimus, vivamus!** Pardon the pedantry of a Latin quotation, my dear, and tell me how I look. Am I, or am I not, the picture of a prosperous man?'

Magdalen attempted to answer him. The captain's deluge of words flowed over her again in a moment.

'Don't exert yourself,' he said; 'I'll put all your questions for you. What have I been about? Why do I look so remarkably well off? And how in the world did I find my way to this house? My dear girl, I have been occupied, since we last saw each other, in slightly modifying my old professional habits. I have shifted from Moral Agriculture to Medical Agriculture. Formerly, I preyed on the public sympathy; now, I prey on the public stomach. Stomach and sympathy, sympathy and stomach—look them both fairly in the face, when you reach the wrong side of fifty, and you will agree with me that they come to much the same thing. However that may be, here I am—incredible as it may appear—a man with an income, at last. The founders of my fortune are three in number. Their names are Aloes, Scammony, and Gamboge.* In plainer words, I am now living—on a Pill. I made a litde money (if you remember) by my friendly connection with you. I made a little more, by the happy decease *(Requiescat in Pace!)* of that female relative of Mrs. Wragge's, from whom, as I told you, my wife had expectations. Very good. What do you think I did? I invested the whole of my capital, at one fell swoop, in advertisements—and purchased my drugs and my pill-boxes on credit. The result is now before you. Here I am, a Grand Financial Fact. Here I am with my clothes positively paid for; with a balance at my banker's; with my servant in livery, and my gig at the door; solvent, flourishing, popular—and all on a Pill.'

Magdalen smiled. The captain's face assumed an expression of mock gravity: he looked as if there was a serious side to the question, and as if he meant to put it next.

'It's no laughing matter to the public, my dear,' he said. 'They can't get rid of me and my Pill—they must take us. There is not a single form of appeal in the whole range of human advertisement, which I am not making to the unfortunate public at this moment. Hire the last new novel—there I am, inside the boards of the book. Send for the last new Song—the instant you open the leaves, I drop out of it. Take a cab—I fly in at the window, in red. Buy a box of tooth-powder at the chemist's—I wrap it up for you, in blue. Show yourself at the theatre—I flutter down on you, in yellow. The mere titles of my advertisements are quite irresistible. Let me quote a few from last week's issue. Proverbial Title:—"A Pill in Time, saves Nine." Familiar Title:—"Excuse me, how is your Stomach?" Patriotic Title:—"What are the three characteristics of a true-born Englishman? His Hearth, his Home, and his Pill." Tide in the form of a nursery dialogue:—"Mamma, I am not well." "What is the matter, my pet?" "I want a litde Pill." Title in the form of an Historical Anecdote:—"New Discovery in the Mine of English History. When the Princes were smothered in the Tower, their faithful attendant collected all the litde possessions left behind them. Among the touching trifles dear to the poor boys, he found a tiny Box. It contained the Pill of the Period. Is it necessary to say, how inferior that Pill was to its Successor, which prince and peasant alike may now obtain"—Et caetera, Et caetera. The place in which my Pill is made, is an advertisement in itself. I have got one of the largest shops in London. Behind one counter (visible to the public through the lucid medium of plate-glass), are four-and-twenty young men, in white aprons, making the Pill. Behind another counter, are four-and-twenty young men, in white cravats, making the boxes. At the bottom of the shop are three elderly accountants, posting the vast financial transactions accruing from the Pill, in three enormous ledgers. Over the door are my name, portrait, and autograph, expanded to colossal proportions, and surrounded, in flowing letters, by the motto of the establishment:—"Down with the Doctors!" Even Mrs. Wragge contributes her quota to this prodigious enterprise. She is the celebrated woman whom I have cured of indescribable agonies from every complaint under the sun. Her portrait is engraved on all the wrappers, with the following inscription beneath it:—"Before she took the Pill, you might have blown this patient away with a feather. Look at her now!!!" Last, not least, my dear girl, the Pill is the cause of my finding my way to this

house. My department in the prodigious Enterprise already mentioned, is to scour the United Kingdom in a gig, establishing Agencies everywhere. While founding one of those Agencies, I heard of a certain friend of mine, who had lately landed in England, after a long sea voyage. I got his address in London—he was a lodger in this house. I called on him forthwith—and was stunned by the news of your illness. Such, in brief, is the history of my existing connection with British Medicine; and so it happens that you see me at the present moment, sitting in the present chair, now as ever, yours truly, Horatio Wragge.'

In these terms the captain brought his personal statement to a close. He looked more and more attentively at Magdalen, the nearer he got to the conclusion. Was there some latent importance attaching to his last words, which did not appear on the face of them? There was. His visit to the sick-room had a serious object; and that object he had now approached.

In describing the circumstances, under which he had become acquainted with Magdalen's present position, Captain Wragge had skirted with his customary dexterity round the remote boundaries of truth. Emboldened by the absence of any public scandal in connection with Noel Vanstone's marriage, or with the event of his death as announced in the newspaper obituary, the captain, roaming the eastern circuit, had ventured back to Aldborough, a fortnight since, to establish an agency there for the sale of his wonderful Pill. No one had recognised him but the landlady of the hotel, who at once insisted on his entering the house, and reading Kirke's letter to her husband. The same night, Captain Wragge was in London, and was closeted with the sailor, in the second-floor room at Aaron's Buildings.

The serious nature of the situation, the indisputable certainty that Kirke must fail in tracing Magdalen's friends, unless he first knew who she really was, had decided the captain on disclosing part, at least, of the truth. Declining to enter into any particulars—for family reasons, which Magdalen might explain on her recovery, if she pleased—he astounded Kirke by telling him that the friendless woman whom he had rescued, and whom he had only known, up to that moment, as Miss Bygrave—was no other than the youngest daughter of Andrew Vanstone. The disclosure, on Kirke's side, of his father's connection with the young officer in Canada, had followed naturally, on the revelation of Magdalen's real name. Captain Wragge had expressed his surprise, but had made no further remark at the time. A fortnight later, however, when the patient's recovery forced the serious difficulty on the doctor, of meeting the questions which Magdalen was sure to ask, the captain's ingenuity had come, as usual, to the rescue.

'You can't tell her the truth,' he said, 'without awakening painful recollections of her stay at Aldborough, into which I am not at liberty to enter. Don't acknowledge, just yet, that Mr. Kirke only knew her as Miss Bygrave of North Shingles, when he found her in this house. Tell her boldly that he knew who she was, and that he felt (what she must feel) that he had an hereditary right to help and protect her as his father's son. I am, as I have already told you,' continued the captain, sticking fast to his old assertion, 'a distant relative of the Combe-Raven family; and, if there is nobody else at hand to help you through this difficulty, my services are freely at your disposal.'

No one else was at hand; and the emergency was a serious one. Strangers undertaking the responsibility might ignorantly jar on past recollections, which it would, perhaps, be the death of her to revive too soon. Near relatives might, by their premature appearance at the bedside, produce the same deplorable result. The alternative lay between irritating and alarming her by leaving her inquiries unanswered—or trusting Captain Wragge. In the doctor's opinion, the second risk was the least serious risk of the two—and the captain was now seated at Magdalen's bedside in discharge of the trust confided to him.

Would she ask the question which it had been the private object of all Captain Wragge's preliminary talk, lightly and pleasantly to provoke. Yes: as soon as his silence gave her the opportunity, she asked it:—Who was

that friend of his living in the house?

‘You ought by rights to know him as well as I do,’ said the captain. ‘He is the son of one of your father’s old military friends—when your father was quartered with his regiment in Canada. Your cheeks mustn’t flush up! If they do I shall go away.’

She was astonished, but not agitated. Captain Wragge had begun by interesting her in the remote past, which she only knew by hearsay, before he ventured on the delicate ground of her own experience.

In a moment more, she advanced to her next question:—What was his name?

‘Kirke,’ proceeded the captain. ‘Did you never hear of his father, Major Kirke—commanding officer of the regiment in Canada? Did you never hear that the major helped your father through a great difficulty, like the best of good fellows and good friends?’

Yes: she faintly fancied she had heard something about her father, and an officer who had once been very good to him when he was a young man. But she could not look back so long.—Was Mr. Kirke poor?

Even Captain Wragge’s penetration was puzzled by that question. He gave the true answer at hazard. ‘No,’ he said, ‘not poor.’

Her next inquiry showed what she had been thinking of.—If Mr. Kirke was not poor, why did he come to live in that house?

‘She has caught me!’ thought the captain. ‘There is only one way out of it—I must administer another dose of truth. Mr. Kirke discovered you here by chance,’ he proceeded aloud; ‘very ill, and not nicely attended to. Somebody was wanted to take care of you, while you were not able to take care of yourself. Why not Mr. Kirke? He was the son of your father’s old friend—which is the next thing to being *your* old friend. Who had a better claim to send for the right doctor, and get the right nurse—when I was not here to cure you with my wonderful Pill? Gently! gently! you mustn’t take hold of my superfine black coat-sleeve in that unceremonious manner.’

He put her hand back on the bed, but she was not to be checked in that way. She persisted in asking another question.—How came Mr. Kirke to know her? She had never seen him; she had never heard of him in her life.

‘Very likely,’ said Captain Wragge. ‘But your never having seen *him*, is no reason why he should not have seen *you.'*

‘When did he see me?’

The Captain corked up his doses of truth on the spot, without a moment’s hesitation.

‘Some time ago, my dear. I can’t exactly say when.’

‘Only once?’

Captain Wragge suddenly saw his way to the administration of another dose. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘only once.’

She reflected a little. The next question involved the simultaneous expression of two ideas—and the next question cost her an effort.

‘He only saw me once,’ she said; ‘and he only saw me some time ago. How came he to remember me, when he

found me here?'

'Aha!' said the captain. 'Now you have hit the right nail on the head at last. You can't possibly be more surprised at his remembering you than I am. A word of advice, my dear. When you are well enough to get up and see Mr. Kirke, try how that sharp question of yours sounds in *his* ears—and insist on his answering it himself.' Slipping out of the dilemma in that characteristically adroit manner, Captain Wragge got briskly on his legs again, and took up his hat.

'Wait!' she pleaded. 'I want to ask you———'

'Not another word,' said the captain. 'I have given you quite enough to think of for one day. My time is up, and my gig is waiting for me. I am off, to scour the country as usual. I am off, to cultivate the field of public indigestion with the triple ploughshare of aloes, scammony, and gamboge.' He stopped and turned round at the door. 'By-the-by, a message from my unfortunate wife. If you will allow her to come and see you again, Mrs. Wragge solemnly promises *not* to lose her shoe next time. *I* don't believe her. What do you say? May she come?'

'Yes; whenever she likes,' said Magdalen. 'If I ever get well again, may poor Mrs. Wragge come and stay with me?'

'Certainly, my dear. If you have no objection, I will provide her, beforehand, with a few thousand impressions in red, blue, and yellow, of her own portrait ('You might have blown this patient away with a feather, before she took the Pill. Look at her now!'). She is sure to drop herself about perpetually wherever she goes, and the most gratifying results, in an advertising point of view, must inevitably follow. Don't think me mercenary—I merely understand the age I live in.' He stopped on his way out, for the second time, and turned round once more at the door. 'You have been a remarkably good girl,' he said, 'and you deserve to be rewarded for it. I'll give you a last piece of information before I go. Have you heard anybody inquiring after you, for the last day or two, outside your door? Ah, I see you have. A word in your ear, my dear. That's Mr. Kirke.' He tripped away from the bedside, as briskly as ever. Magdalen heard him advertising himself to the nurse, before he closed the door. 'If you are ever asked about it,' he said, in a confidential whisper, 'the name is Wragge, and the Pill is to be had in neat boxes, price thirteen pence half-penny, government stamp included. Take a few copies of the portrait of a female-patient, whom you might have blown away with a feather before she took the Pill, and whom you are simply requested to contemplate now. Many thanks. *Good* morning.'

The door closed, and Magdalen was alone again. She felt no sense of solitude; Captain Wragge had left her with something new to think of. Hour after hour, her mind dwelt wonderingly on Mr. Kirke, until the evening came, and she heard his voice again, through the half-opened door.

'I am very grateful,' she said to him, before the nurse could answer his inquiries—'very, very grateful for all your goodness to me.'

'Try to get well,' he replied kindly. 'You will more than reward me, if you try to get well.'

The next morning, Mr. Merrick found her impatient to leave her bed, and be moved to the sofa in the front room. The doctor said he supposed she wanted a change. 'Yes,' she replied; 'I want to see Mr. Kirke.' The doctor consented to move her on the next day, but he positively forbade the additional excitement of seeing anybody, until the day after. She attempted a remonstrance—Mr. Merrick was impenetrable. She tried, when he was gone, to win the nurse by persuasion—the nurse was impenetrable too.

On the next day, they wrapped her in shawls, and carried her in to the sofa, and made her a little bed on it. On

the table near at hand, were some flowers and a number of an illustrated newspaper. She immediately asked who had put them there. The nurse (failing to notice a warning look from the doctor) said Mr. Kirke had thought that she might like the flowers, and that the pictures in the paper might amuse her. After that reply, her anxiety to see Mr. Kirke became too ungovernable to be trifled with. The doctor left the room at once to fetch him.

She looked eagerly at the opening door. Her first glance at him, as he came in, raised a doubt in her mind, whether she now saw that tall figure, and that open sunburnt face for the first time. But she was too weak and too agitated to follow her recollections as far back as Aldborough. She resigned the attempt, and only looked at him. He stopped at the foot of the sofa, and said a few cheering words. She beckoned to him to come nearer, and offered him her wasted hand. He tenderly took it in his, and sat down by her. They were both silent. His face told her of the sorrow and the sympathy which his silence would fain have concealed. She still held his hand—-consciously now—as persistently as she had held it on the day when he found her. Her eyes closed, after a vain effort to speak to him, and the tears rolled slowly over her wan white cheeks.

The doctor signed to Kirke, to wait and give her time. She recovered a little and looked at him:—'How kind you have been to me!' she murmured. 'And how little I have deserved it!'

'Hush! hush!' he said. 'You don't know what a happiness it was to me to help you.'

The sound of his voice seemed to strengthen her, and to give her courage. She lay looking at him with an eager interest, with a gratitude which artlessly ignored all the conventional restraints that interpose between a woman and a man. 'Where did you see me,' she said suddenly, 'before you found me here?'

Kirke hesitated. Mr. Merrick came to his assistance.

'I forbid you to say a word about the past, to Mr. Kirke,' interposed the doctor; 'and I forbid Mr. Kirke to say a word about it to *you*. You are beginning a new life today—and the only recollections I sanction, are recollections five minutes old:'

She looked at the doctor, and smiled. 'I must ask him one question,' she said—and turned back again to Kirke. 'Is it true that you had only seen me once, before you came to this house?'

'Quite true!' He made the reply with a sudden change of colour which she instantly detected. Her brightening eyes looked at him more earnestly than ever, as she put her next question.

'How came you to remember me, after only seeing me once?'

His hand unconsciously closed on hers, and pressed it for the first time. He attempted to answer, and hesitated at the first word. 'I have a good memory,' he said at last—and suddenly looked away from her with a confusion so strangely unlike his customary self-possession of manner, that the doctor and the nurse both noticed it.

Every nerve in her body felt that momentary pressure of his hand, with the exquisite susceptibility, which accompanies the first faltering advance on the way to health. She looked at his changing colour, she listened to his hesitating words, with every sensitive perception of her sex and age, quickened to seize intuitively on the truth. In the moment when he looked away from her, she gently took her hand from him, and turned her head aside on the pillow. *'Can* it be?' she thought, with a flutter of delicious fear at her heart, with a glow of delicious confusion burning on her cheeks. *'Can* it be?'

The doctor made another sign to Kirke. He understood it, and rose immediately. The momentary discomposure in his face and manner had both disappeared. He was satisfied in his own mind that he had successfully kept his secret, and in the relief of feeling that conviction, he had become himself again.

‘Good-bye; till to-morrow,’ he said, as he left the room.

‘Good-bye,’ she answered, softly, without looking at him.

Mr. Merrick took the chair which Kirke had resigned, and laid his hand on her pulse. ‘Just what I feared,’ remarked the doctor: ‘too quick by half.’

She petulantly snatched away her wrist. ‘Don’t!’ she said, shrinking from him. ‘Pray don’t touch me!’

Mr. Merrick good-humouredly gave up his place to the nurse. ‘I’ll return in half an hour,’ he whispered; ‘and carry her back to bed. Don’t let her talk. Show her the pictures in the newspaper, and keep her quiet in that way.’

When the doctor returned, the nurse reported that the newspaper had not been wanted. The patient’s conduct had been exemplary. She had not been at all restless, and she had never spoken a word.

The days passed; and the time grew longer and longer which the doctor allowed her to spend in the front room. She was soon able to dispense with the bed on the sofa—she could be dressed, and could sit up, supported by pillows, in an arm-chair. Her hours of emancipation from the bed-room represented the great daily event of her life. They were the hours she passed in Kirke’s society.

She had a double interest in him now—her interest in the man whose protecting care had saved her reason and her life; her interest in the man whose heart’s dearest and deepest secret she had surprised. Little by little, they grew as easy and familiar with each other as old friends; little by little, she presumed on all her privileges, and wound her way unsuspected into the most intimate knowledge of his nature.

Her questions were endless. Everything that he could tell her of himself and his life, she drew from him delicately and insensibly: he, the least self-conscious of mankind, became an egotist in her dexterous hands. She found out his pride in his ship, and practised on it without remorse. She drew him into talking of the fine qualities of the vessel, of the great things the vessel had done in emergencies, as he had never in his life talked yet to any living creature on shore. She found him out in private seafaring anxieties and unutterable seafaring exultations, which he had kept a secret from his own mate. She watched his kindling face with a delicious sense of triumph in adding fuel to the fire; she trapped him into forgetting all considerations of time and place, and striking as hearty a stroke on the rickety little lodging-house table, in the fervour of his talk, as if his hand had descended on the solid bulwark of his ship. His confusion at the discovery of his own forgetfulness, secretly delighted her; she could have cried with pleasure, when he penitently wondered what he could possibly have been thinking of.

At other times, she drew him from dwelling on the pleasures of his life, and led him into talking of its perils—the perils of that jealous mistress the sea, which had absorbed so much of his existence, which had kept him so strangely innocent and ignorant of the world on shore. Twice he had been shipwrecked. Times innumerable, he and all with him had been threatened with death, and had escaped their doom by the narrowness of a hair’s breadth. He was always unwilling at the outset to speak of this dark and dreadful side of his life: it was only by adroitly tempting him, by laying little snares for him in his talk, that she lured him into telling her of the terrors of the great deep. She sat listening to him with a breathless interest, looking at him with a breathless wonder, as those fearful stories—made doubly vivid by the simple language in which he told them—fell, one by one, from his lips. His noble unconsciousness of his own heroism—the artless modesty with which he described his own acts of dauntless endurance and devoted courage, without an idea that they were anything more than plain acts of duty to which he was bound by the vocation that he followed—raised him to a place in her estimation so hopelessly high above her, that she became uneasy and impatient until she had pulled down the idol again,

which she herself had set up. It was on these occasions that she most rigidly exacted from him all those little familiar attentions so precious to women in their intercourse with men. 'This hand,' she thought, with an exquisite delight in secretly following the idea while he was close to her—'this hand that has rescued the drowning from death—is shifting my pillows so tenderly that I hardly know when they are moved. This hand that has seized men mad with mutiny, and driven them back to their duty by main force—is mixing my lemonade and peeling my fruit, more delicately and more neatly than I could do it for myself. Oh, if I could be a man, how I should like to be such a man as this!'

She never allowed her thoughts, while she was in his presence, to lead her beyond that point. It was only when the night had separated them, that she ventured to let her mind dwell on the self-sacrificing devotion which had so mercifully rescued her. Kirke little knew how she thought of him, in the secrecy of her own chamber, during the quiet hours that elapsed before she sunk to sleep. No suspicion crossed his mind of the influence which he was exerting over her—of the new spirit which he was breathing into that new life, so sensitively open to impression in the first freshness of its recovered sense! 'She has nobody else to amuse her, poor thing,' he used to think sadly, sitting alone in his small second-floor room. 'If a rough fellow like me can beguile the weary hours, till her friends come here, she is heartily welcome to all that I can tell her.'

He was out of spirits and restless now, whenever he was by himself. Little by little, he fell into a habit of taking long lonely walks at night, when Magdalen thought he was sleeping upstairs. Once, he went away abruptly in the daytime—on business, as he said. Something had passed between Magdalen and himself the evening before, which had led her into telling him her age. 'Twenty, last birthday,' he thought. 'Take twenty from forty-one. An easy sum in subtraction—as easy a sum as my little nephew could wish for.' He walked to the Docks, and looked bitterly at the shipping. 'I mustn't forget how a ship is made,' he said. 'It won't be long before I am back at the old work again.' On leaving the Docks, he paid a visit to a brother-sailor—a married man. In the course of conversation, he asked how much older his friend might be than his friend's wife. There was six years' difference between them. 'I suppose that's difference enough?' said Kirke. 'Yes,' said his friend. 'Quite enough. Are you looking out for a wife at last? Try a seasoned woman of thirty-five—that's your mark, Kirke, as near as I can calculate.'

The time passed smoothly and quickly—the present time, in which *she* was recovering so happily—the present time, which *he* was beginning to distrust already.

Early one morning, Mr. Merrick surprised Kirke, by a visit in his little room on the second floor.

'I came to the conclusion yesterday,' said the doctor, entering abruptly on his business, 'that our patient was strong enough to justify us, at last, in running all risks, and communicating with her friends; and I have accordingly followed the clue which that queer fellow, Captain Wragge, put into our hands. You remember he advised us to apply to Mr. Pendril, the lawyer? I saw Mr. Pendril two days ago, and was referred by him—not over-willingly as I thought—to a lady named Miss Garth. I heard enough from her, to satisfy me that we have exercised a wise caution in acting as we have done. It is a very, very sad story—and I am bound to say that I, for one, make great allowances for the poor girl down-stairs. Her only relation in the world is her elder sister. I have suggested that the sister shall write to her in the first instance—and then, if the letter does her no harm, follow it personally in a day or two. I have not given the address, by way of preventing any visits from being paid here, without my permission. All I have done is to undertake to forward the letter; and I shall probably find it at my house when I get back. Can you stop at home until I send my man with it? There is not the least hope of my being able to bring it myself. All you need do, is to watch for an opportunity when she is not in the front room, and to put the letter where she can see it when she comes in. The handwriting on the address will break the news, before she opens the letter. Say nothing to her about it—take care that the landlady is within call—and

leave her to herself. I know I can trust *you* to follow my directions; and that is why I ask you to do us this service. You look out of spirits this morning. Natural enough. You're used to plenty of fresh air, captain, and you're beginning to pine in this close place.'

'May I ask a question, doctor? Is *she* pining in this close place, too? When her sister comes, will her sister take her away?'

'Decidedly—if my advice is followed. She will be well enough to be moved, in a week or less. Good day. You are certainly out of spirits, and your hand feels feverish. Pining for the blue water, captain—pining for the blue water!' With that expression of opinion, the doctor cheerfully went out.

In an hour, the letter arrived. Kirke took it from the landlady reluctandy, and almost roughly, without looking at it. Having ascertained that Magdalen was still engaged at her toilet, and having explained to the landlady the necessity of remaining within call, he went down-stairs immediately, and put the letter on the table in the front room.

Magdalen heard the sound of the familiar step on the floor. 'I shall soon be ready,' she called to him through the door.

He made no reply—he took his hat, and went out. After a momentary hesitation, he turned his face eastward, and called on the shipowners who employed him, at their office in Comhill.

Chapter III

Magdalen's first glance round the empty room, showed her the letter on the table. The address, as the doctor had predicted, broke the news the moment she looked at it.

Not a word escaped her. She sat down by the table, pale and silent, with the letter in her lap. Twice she attempted to open it, and twice she put it back again. The bygone time was not alone in her mind, as she looked at her sister's handwriting—the fear of Kirke was there with it. 'My past fife!' she thought. 'What will he think of me, when he knows my past life?'

She made another effort, and broke the seal. A second letter dropped out of the enclosure, addressed to her in a handwriting with which she was not familiar. She put the second letter aside, and read the lines which Norah had written.

'Ventnor, Isle of Wight, August 24th.

'My Dearest Magdalen,

'When you read this letter, try to think we have only been parted since yesterday; and dismiss from your mind (as I have dismissed from mine) the past and all that belongs to it.

'I am strictly forbidden to agitate you, or to weary you by writing a long letter. Is it wrong to tell you that I am the happiest woman living? I hope not, for I can't keep the secret to myself.

'My darling, prepare yourself for the greatest surprise I have ever caused you. I am married. It is only a week to-day, since I parted with my old name—it is only a week, since I have been the happy wife of George Bartram,

of St. Crux.

‘There were difficulties at first, in the way of our marriage; some of them, I am afraid, of my making. Happily for me, my husband knew from the beginning, that I really loved him—he gave me a second chance of telling him so, after I had lost the first—and as you see, I was wise enough to take it. You ought to be especially interested, my love, in this marriage; for you are the cause of it. If I had not gone to Aldborough to search for the lost trace of you—if George had not been brought there, at the same time, by circumstances in which you were concerned—my husband and I might never have met. When we look back to our first impressions of each other, we look back to *you*.

‘I must keep my promise not to weary you; I must bring this letter (sorely against my will) to an end. Patience! patience!—I shall see you soon. George and I are both coming to London to take you back with us to Ventnor. This is my husband’s invitation, mind, as well as mine. Don’t suppose I married him, Magdalen, until I had taught him to think of you as I think—to wish with my wishes, and to hope with my hopes. I could say so much more about this, so much more about George, if I might only give my thoughts and my pen their own way. But I must leave Miss Garth (at her own special request) a blank space to fill up on the last page of this letter; and I must only add one word more, before I say good-bye—a word to warn you that I have another surprise in store, which I am keeping in reserve until we meet. Don’t attempt to guess what it is. You might guess for ages, and be no nearer than you are now to a discovery of the truth.

‘Your affectionate sister,

‘Norah Bartram.’

(*added by Miss Garth*.)

‘ My Dear Child,

‘If I had ever lost my old loving recollection of you, I should feel it in my heart again now, when I know that it has pleased God to restore you to us, from the brink of the grave. I add these lines to your sister’s letter, because I am not sure that you are are quite so fit yet, as she thinks you, to accept her proposal. She has not said a word of her husband, or herself, which is not true. But Mr. Bartram is a stranger to you—and if you think you can recover more easily and more pleasantly to yourself, under the wing of your old governess, than under the protection of your new brother-in-law, come to me first, and trust to my reconciling Norah to the change of plans. I have secured the refusal of a litde cottage at Shanklin—near enough to your sister to allow of your seeing each other whenever you like, and far enough away, at the same time, to secure you the privilege, when you wish it, of being alone. Send me one line, before we meet, to say Yes or No—and I will write to Shanklin by the next post.

‘Always yours affectionately,

‘Harriet Garth.’

The letter dropped from Magdalen’s hand. Thoughts which had never risen in her mind yet, rose in it now.

Norah, whose courage under undeserved calamity, had been the courage of resignation—Norah, who had patiently accepted her hard lot; who, from first to last, had meditated no vengeance, and stooped to no deceit—Norah had reached the end which all her sister’s ingenuity, all her sister’s resolution, and all her sister’s daring, had failed to achieve. Openly and honourably, with love on one side and love on the other, Norah had married the man who possessed the Combe-Raven money—and Magdalen’s own scheme to recover it, had opened the

way to the event which had brought husband and wife together!

As the light of that overwhelming discovery broke on her mind, the old strife was renewed; and Good and Evil struggled once more which should win her—but with added forces this time; with the new spirit that had been breathed into her new life; with the nobler sense that had grown with the growth of her gratitude to the man who had saved her, fighting on the better side. All the higher impulses of her nature, which had never, from first to last, let her err with impunity—which had tortured her, before her marriage and after it, with the remorse that no woman inherently heardess and inherently wicked can feel—all the nobler elements in her character gathered their forces for the crowning struggle, and strengthened her to meet, with no unworthy shrinking, the revelation that had opened on her view. Clearer and clearer, in the light of its own immortal life, the truth rose before her from the ashes of her dead passions, from the grave of her buried hopes. When she looked at the letter again—when she read the words once more, which told her that the recovery of the lost fortune was her sister's triumph, not hers—she had victoriously trampled down all littie jealousies and all mean regrets; she could say in her heart of hearts, 'Norah has deserved it!'

The day wore on. She sat absorbed in her own thoughts, and heedless of the second letter which she had not oppned yet, until Kirke's return.

He stopped on the landing outside, and, opening the door a little way only, asked, without entering the room, if she wanted anything that he could send her. She begged him to come in. His face was worn and weary; he looked older than she had seen him look yet. 'Did you put my letter on the table for me?' she asked.

'Yes. I put it there at the doctor's request.'

'I suppose the doctor told you it was from my sister? She is coming to see me, and Miss Garth is coming to see me. They will thank you for all your goodness to me, better than I can.'

'I have no claim on their thanks,' he answered sternly. 'What I have done, was not done for them, but for you.' He waited a littie, and looked at her. His face would have betrayed him, in that look; his voice would have betrayed him, in the next words he spoke—if she had not guessed the truth already. 'When your friends come here,' he resumed, 'they will take you away, I suppose, to some better place than this?'

'They can take me to no place,' she said gently, 'which I shall think of as I think of the place where you found me. They can take me to no dearer friend than the friend who has saved my life.'

There was a moment's silence between them.

'We have been very happy here,' he went on, in lower and lower tones. 'You won't forget me, when we have said good-bye?'

She turned pale, as the words passed his lips; and, leaving her chair, knelt down at the table, so as to look up into his face, and to force him to look into hers.

'Why do you talk of it?' she asked. 'We are not going to say good-bye—at least, not yet.'

'I thought———' he began.

'Yes?'

'I thought your friends were coming here———'

She eagerly interrupted him. 'Do you think I would go away with anybody,' she said, 'even with the dearest

relation I have in the world—and leave you here, not knowing and not caring whether I ever saw you again? Oh, you don't think that of me!' she exclaimed, with the passionate tears springing into her eyes—'I'm sure you don't think that of me!'

'No,' he said; 'I never have thought, I never can think, unjustly or unworthily of you.'

Before he could add another word, she left the table as suddenly as she had approached it, and returned to her chair. He had unconsciously replied in terms that reminded her of the hard necessity which still remained unfulfilled—the necessity of telling him the story of the past. Not an idea of concealing that story from his knowledge crossed her mind. 'Will he love me, when he knows the truth, as he loves me now?' That was her only thought, as she tried to approach the subject in his presence without shrinking from it.

'Let us put my own feelings out of the question,' she said. 'There is a reason for my not going away, unless I first have the assurance of seeing you again. You have a claim—the strongest claim of any one—to know how I came here, unknown to my friends, and how it was that you found me fallen so low.'

'I make no claim,' he said hastily. 'I wish to know nothing which it distresses you to tell me.'

'You have always done your duty,' she rejoined, with a faint smile. 'Let me take example from you, if I can, and try to do mine.'

'I am old enough to be your father,' he said bitterly. 'Duty is more easily done at my age than it is at yours.'

His age was so constantly in his mind now, that he fancied it must be in her mind too. She had never given it a thought. The reference he had just made to it, did not divert her for a moment from the subject on which she was speaking to him.

'You don't know how I value your good opinion of me,' she said, struggling resolutely to sustain her sinking courage. 'How can I deserve your kindness, how can I feel that I am worthy of your regard, until I have opened my heart to you? Oh, don't encourage me in my own miserable weakness! Help me to tell the truth—*force* me to tell it, for my own sake, if not for yours!'

He was deeply moved by the fervent sincerity of that appeal.

'You *shall* tell it,' he said. 'You are right—and I was wrong.' He waited a litde, and considered. 'Would it be easier to you,' he asked, with delicate consideration for her, 'to write it than to tell it?'

She caught gratefully at the suggestion. 'Far easier,' she replied. 'I can be sure of myself—I can be sure of hiding nothing from you, if I write it. Don't write to me, on your side!' she added suddenly, seeing, with a woman's instinctive quickness of penetration, the danger of totally renouncing her personal influence over him. 'Wait till we meet; and tell me with your own lips, what you think.'

'Where shall I tell it?'

'Here!' she said eagerly. 'Here, where you found me helpless—here, where you have brought me back to life, and where I have first learnt to know you. I can bear the hardest words you say to me, if you will only say them in this room. It is impossible I can be away longer than a month; a month will be enough, and more than enough. If I come back———' She stopped confusedly. 'I am thinking of myself,' she said, 'when I ought to be thinking of you. You have your own occupations, and your own friends. Will you decide for us? Will you say how it shall be?'

‘It shall be as you wish. If you come back in a month, you will find me here.’

‘Will it cause you no sacrifice of your own comfort, and your own plans?’

‘It will cause me nothing,’ he replied, ‘but a journey back to the City.’ He rose and took his hat. ‘I must go there at once,’ he added, ‘or I shall not be in time.’

‘It is a promise between us?’ she said—and held out her hand.

‘Yes,’ he answered, a litde sadly. ‘It is a promise.’

Slight as it was, the shade of melancholy in his manner pained her. Forgetting all other anxieties in the anxiety to cheer him, she gently pressed the hand he gave her. ‘If *that* won’t tell him the truth,’ she thought, ‘nothing will.’

It failed to tell him the truth—but it forced a question on his mind, which he had not ventured to ask himself before. ‘Is it her gratitude, or her love, that is speaking to me?’ he wondered. ‘If I was only a younger man, I might almost hope it was her love.’ That terrible sum in subtraction, which had first presented itself on the day when she told him her age, began to trouble him again, as he left the house. He took twenty from forty-one at intervals, all the way back to the shipowners’ office in Cornhill.

Left by herself, Magdalen approached the table, to write the fine of answer which Miss Garth requested, and gratefully to accept the proposal that had been made to her.

The second letter, which she had laid aside and forgotten, was the first object that caught her eye, on changing her place. She opened it immediately, and not recognizing the handwriting, looked at the signature. To her unutterable astonishment, her correspondent proved to be no less a person than—old Mr. Clare!

The philosopher’s letter dispensed with all the ordinary forms of address, and entered on its subject without prefatory phrases of any kind, in these uncompromising terms:—

‘I have more news for you of that contemptible cur, my son. Here it is in the fewest possible words.

‘I always told you, if you remember, that Frank was a Sneak. The very first trace recovered of him, after his running away from his employers in China, presents him in that character. Where do you think he turns up next? He turns up, hidden behind a couple of flour barrels, on board an English vessel bound homeward from Hong-Kong to London.

‘The name of the ship was The Deliverance; and the commander was one Captain Kirke. Instead of acting like a sensible man, and throwing Frank overboard, Captain Kirke was fool enough to listen to his story. He made the most of his misfortunes, you may be sure. He was half starved; he was an Englishman lost in a strange country, without a friend to help him; his only chance of getting home was to sneak into the hold of an English vessel—and he had sneaked in, accordingly, at Hong-Kong, two days since. That was his story. Any other lout in Frank’s situation, would have been rope’s-ended by any other captain. Deserving no pity from anybody—Frank was, as a matter of course, coddled and compassionated on the spot. The captain took him by the hand, the crew pitied him, and the passengers patted him on the back. He was fed, clothed, and presented with his passage home. Luck enough, so far, you will say. Nothing of the sort; nothing like luck enough for my despicable son.

‘The ship touched at the Cape of Good Hope. Among his other acts of folly, Captain Kirke took a woman-passenger on board, at that place—not a young woman, by any means—the elderly widow of a rich colonist. Is it necessary to say that she forthwith became deeply interested in Frank and his misfortunes? Is it necessary to

tell you what followed? Look back at my son's career; and you will see that what followed was all of a piece with what went before. He didn't deserve your poor father's interest in him—and he got it. He didn't deserve your attachment—and he got it. He didn't deserve the best place in one of the best offices in London; he didn't deserve an equally good chance in one of the best mercantile houses in China; he didn't deserve food, clothing, pity, and a free passage home—and he got them all. Last, not least, he didn't even deserve to marry a woman old enough to be his grandmother—and he has done, it! Not five minutes since, I sent his wedding-cards out to the dust-hole, and tossed the letter that came with them into the fire. The last piece of information which that letter contains is, that he and his wife are looking out for a house and estate to suit them. Mark my words! Frank will get one of the best estates in England; a seat in the House of Commons will follow as a matter of course; and one of the legislators of this Ass-ridden country will be————My Lout!

'If you are the sensible girl I have always taken you for, you have long since learnt to rate Frank at his true value, and the news I send you will only confirm your contempt for him. I wish your poor father could but have lived to see this day! Often as I have missed my old gossip, I don't know that I ever felt the loss of him so keenly, as I felt it when Frank's wedding-cards and Frank's letter came to this house.

'Your friend, if you ever want one,

'Francis Clare, Sen.'

With one momentary disturbance of her composure, produced by the appearance of Kirke's name in Mr. Clare's singular narrative, Magdalen read the letter steadily through from beginning to end. The time when it could have ; distressed her, was gone by; the scales had long since fallen from her eyes. Mr. Clare himself would have been satisfied, if he had seen the quiet contempt on her face as she laid aside his letter. The only serious thought it cost her, was a thought in which Kirke was concerned. The careless manner in which he had referred, in her presence, to the passengers on board his ship, without mentioning any of them by their names, showed her that Frank must have kept silence on the subject of the engagement once existing between them. The confession of that vanished delusion was left for her to make—as part of the story of the past which she had pledged herself unreservedly to reveal.

She wrote to Miss Garth, and sent the letter to the post immediately.

The next morning brought a line of rejoinder. Miss Garth had written to secure the cottage at Shanklin, and Mr. Merrick had consented to Magdalen's removal on the following day. Norah would be the first to arrive at the house; and Miss Garth would follow, with a comfortable carriage to take the invalid to the railway. Every needful arrangement had been made for her: the effort of moving was the one effort she would have to make.

Magdalen read the letter thankfully—but her thoughts wandered from it, and followed Kirke on his return to the City. What was the business which had once already taken him there in the morning? And why had the promise exchanged between them, obliged him to go to the City again, for the second time in one day?

Was it, by any chance, business relating to the sea? Were his employers tempting him to go back to his ship?

Chapter IV

The first agitation of the meeting between the sisters was over; the first vivid impressions, half pleasurable, half painful, had softened a little—and Norah and Magdalen sat together, hand in hand; each rapt in the silent fulness

of her own joy.

Magdalen was the first to speak.

‘You have something to tell me, Norah?’

‘I have a thousand things to tell you, my love; and you have ten thousand things to tell me.—Do you mean that second surprise, which I told you of in my letter?’

‘Yes. I suppose it must concern me very nearly—or you would hardly have thought of mentioning it in your first letter?’

‘It does concern you very nearly. You have heard of George’s house in Essex? You must be familiar, at least, with the name of St. Crux?—What is there to start at, my dear? I am afraid you are hardly strong enough for any more surprises just yet?’

‘Quite strong enough, Norah. I have something to say to you about St. Crux—I have a surprise, on my side, *for you.’*

‘Will you tell it me now?’

‘Not now. You shall know it when we are at the seaside—you shall know it, before I accept the kindness which has invited me to your husband’s house.’

‘What *can* it be? Why not tell me at once?’

‘You used often to set me the example of patience, Norah, in old times—will you set me the example now?’

‘With all my heart. Shall I return to my own story as well? Yes? Then we will go back to it at once. I was telling you that St. Crux is George’s house, in Essex; the house he inherited from his uncle. Knowing that Miss Garth had a curiosity to see the place, he left word (when he went abroad after the admiral’s death) that she and any friends who came with her, were to be admitted, if she happened to find herself in the neighbourhood during his absence. Miss Garth and I, and a large party of Mr. Tyrrel’s friends, found ourselves in the neighbourhood, not long after George’s departure. We had all been invited to see the launch of Mr. Tyrrel’s new yacht, from the builder’s yard at Wivenhoe in Essex. When the launch was over, the rest of the company returned to Colchester to dine. Miss Garth and I contrived to get into the same carriage together, with nobody but my two litde pupils for our companions. We gave the coachman his orders, and drove round by St. Crux. The moment Miss Garth mentioned her name, we were let in, and shown all over the house. I don’t know how to describe it to you: it is the most bewildering place I ever saw in my life———’

‘Don’t attempt to describe it, Norah. Go on with your story instead.’

‘Very well. My story takes me straight into one of the rooms at St. Crux—a room about as long as your street here; so dreary, so dirty, and so dreadfully cold, that I shiver at the bare recollection of it. Miss Garth was for getting out of it again, as speedily as possible, and so was I. But the housekeeper declined to let us off without first looking at a singular piece of furniture, the only piece of furniture in the comfordess place. She called it a tripod, I think. (There is nothing to be alarmed at, Magdalen; I assure you there is nothing to be alarmed at!) At any rate, it was a strange three-legged thing, which supported a great pan full of charcoal ashes at the top. It was considered, by all good judges (the housekeeper told us), a wonderful piece of chasing in metal; and she especially pointed out the beauty of some scroll-work running round the inside of the pan, with Latin mottoes on it, signifying———I forget what. I felt not the slightest interest in the thing myself, but I looked close at the

scroll-work to satisfy the housekeeper. To confess the truth, she was rather tiresome with her mechanically-learnt lecture on fine metal-work—and, while she was talking, I found myself idly stirring the soft feathery white ashes backwards and forwards with my hand, pretending to listen, with my mind a hundred miles away from her. I don't know how long or how short a time I had been playing with the ashes, when my fingers suddenly encountered a piece of crumpled paper, hidden deep among them. When I brought it to the surface, it proved to be a letter—a long letter fiill of cramped, close writing.—You have anticipated my story, Magdalen, before I can end it! You know as well as I do, that the letter which my idle fingers found, was the Secret Trust. Hold out your hand, my dear. I have got George's permission to show it to you,—and there it is!'

She put the Trust into her sister's hand. Magdalen took it from her mechanically. 'You!' she said, looking at her sister with the remembrance of all that she had vainly ventured, of all that she had vainly suffered, at St. Crux. '*You* have found it!'

'Yes,' said Norah, gaily; 'the Trust has proved no exception to the general perversity of all lost things. Look for them, and they remain invisible. Leave them alone, and they reveal themselves! You and your lawyer, Magdalen, were both justified in supposing that your interest in this discovery was an interest of no common kind. I spare you all our consultations after I had produced the crumpled paper from the ashes. It ended in George's lawyer being written to, and in George himself being recalled from the Continent. Miss Garth and I both saw him, immediately on his return; he did, what neither of us could do—he solved the mystery of the Trust being hidden in the charcoal ashes. Admiral Bartram, you must know, was all his life subject to fits of somnambulism. He had been found walking in his sleep, not long before his death—just at the time, too, when he was sadly troubled in his mind on the subject of that very letter in your hand. George's idea is that he must have fancied he was doing, in his sleep, what he would have died rather than do in his waking moments—destroying the Trust. The fire had been fit in the pan not long before, and he no doubt saw it still burning in his dream. This was George's explanation of the strange position of the letter when I discovered it. The question of what was to be done with the letter itself, came next, and was no easy question for a woman to understand. But I determined to master it, and I did master it, because it related to you.'

'Let me try to master it, in my turn,' said Magdalen. 'I have a particular reason for wishing to know as much about this letter, as you know yourself. What has it done for others? and what is it to do for me?'

'My dear Magdalen, how strangely you look at it! how strangely you talk of it! Worthless as it may appear, that morsel of paper gives you a fortune.'

'Is my only claim to the fortune, the claim which this letter gives me?'

'Yes—the letter is your only claim. Shall I try if I can explain it, in two words? Taken by itself, the letter might, in the lawyer's opinion, have been made a matter for dispute—though I am sure George would have sanctioned no proceeding of that sort. Taken, however, with the postscript which Admiral Bartram attached to it (you will see the lines, if you look under the signature on the third page), it becomes legally binding, as well as morally binding, on the Admiral's representatives. I have exhausted my small stock of legal words, and must go on in my own language, instead of in the lawyer's. The end of the thing was simply this. All the money went back to Mr. Noel Vanstone's estate (another legal word! my vocabulary is richer than I thought), for one plain reason—that it had not been employed as Mr. Noel Vanstone directed. If Mrs. Girdlestone had lived, or if George had married me a few months earlier, results would have been just the other way. As it is, half the money has been already divided between Mr. Noel Vanstone's next of kin; which means, translated into plain English, my husband, arid his poor bedridden sister—who took the money formally, one day, to satisfy the lawyer, and who gave it back again generously, the next, to satisfy herself. So much for one half of this legacy. The other half, my dear, is all yours. How strangely events happen, Magdalen! It is only two years since you and I were left

disinherited orphans—and we are sharing our poor father's fortune between us, after all!'

'Wait a little, Norah. Our shares come to us in very different ways.'

'Do they? Mine comes to me, by my husband. Yours comes to you-————' she stopped confusedly, and changed colour. 'Forgive me, my own love!' she said, putting Magdalen's hand to her lips. 'I have forgotten what I ought to have remembered. I have thoughtlessly distressed you!'

'No!' said Magdalen. 'You have encouraged me.'

'Encouraged you?'

'You shall see.'

With those words, she rose quietly from the sofa, and walked to the open window. Before Norah could follow her, she had torn the Trust to pieces, and had cast the fragments into the street.

She came back to the sofa, and laid her head, with a deep sigh of relief, on Norah's bosom. 'I will owe nothing to my past life,' she said. 'I have parted with it, as I have parted with those torn morsels of paper. All the thoughts, and all the hopes belonging to it, are put away from me for ever!'

'Magdalen! my husband will never allow you; I will never allow you, myself————'

'Hush! hush! What your husband thinks right, Norah, you and I will think right, too. I will take from *you*, what I would never have taken, if that letter had given it to me. The end I dreamed of has come. Nothing is changed, but the position I once thought we might hold towards each other. Better as it is, my love—far, far better as it is!'

So, she made the last sacrifice of the old perversity and the old pride. So, she entered on the new and nobler life.

A month had passed. The autumn sunshine was bright even in the murky streets; and the clocks in thè neighbourhood were just striking two, as Magdalen returned alone to the house in Aaron's Buildings.

'Is he waiting for me?' she asked anxiously, when the landlady let her in.

He was waiting in the front room. Magdalen stole up the stairs, and knocked at the door. He called to her carelessly and absently to come in—plainly thinking that it was only the servant who applied for permission to enter the room.

'You hardly expected me so soon?' she said, speaking on the threshold, and pausing there to enjoy his surprise as he started to his feet and looked at her.

The only traces of illness still visible in her face, left a delicacy in its outline which added refinement to her beauty. She was simply dressed in muslin. Her plain straw bonnet had no other ornament than the white ribbon with which it was sparingly trimmed. She had never looked lovelier in her best days, than she looked now—as she advanced to the table at which he had been sitting, with a litde basket of flowers that she had brought with her from the country, and offered him her hand.

He looked anxious and careworn, when she saw him closer. She interrupted his first inquiries and congratulations to ask if he had remained in London, since they had parted—if he had not even gone away for a few days only, to see his friends in Suffolk? No; he had been in London ever since. He never told her that the pretty parsonage-house in Suffolk wanted all those associations with herself, in which the poor four walls at

Aaron's Buildings were so rich. He only said, he had been in London ever since.

'I wonder,' she asked, looking him attentively in the face, 'if you are as happy to see me again, as I am to see you?'

'Perhaps, I am even happier, in my different way,' he answered, with a smile.

She took off her bonnet and scarf, and seated herself once more in her own arm-chair. 'I suppose this street is very ugly,' she said; 'and I am sure nobody can deny that the house is very small. And yet—and yet, it feels like coming home again. Sit there, where you used to sit; tell me about yourself. I want to know all that you have done, all that you have thought even, while I have been away.' She tried to resume the endless succession of questions by means of which she was accustomed to lure him into speaking of himself. But she put them far less spontaneously, far less adroitly than usual. Her one all-absorbing anxiety in entering that room, was not an anxiety to be trifled with. After a quarter of an hour wasted in constrained inquiries on one side, in reluctant replies on the other, she ventured near the dangerous subject at last.

'Have you received the letters I wrote to you from the sea-side?' she asked, suddenly looking away from him for the first time.

'Yes,' he said, 'all.'

'Have you read them?'

'Every one of them; many times over.'

Her heart beat as if it would suffocate her. She had kept her promise bravely. The whole story of her life, from the time of the home-wreck at Combe-Raven, to the time when she had destroyed the Secret Trust in her sister's presence, had been all laid before him. Nothing that she had done, nothing even that she had thought, had been concealed from his knowledge. As he would have kept a pledged engagement with her, so she had kept her pledged engagement with him. She had not faltered in the resolution to do this—and now she faltered over the one decisive question which she had come there to ask. Strong as the desire in her was to know if she had lost or won him, the fear of knowing was at that moment stronger still. She waited and trembled: she waited, and said no more.

'May I speak to you about your letters?' he asked. 'May I tell you———?'

If she had looked at him, as he said those few words, she would have seen what he thought of her, in his face. She would have seen, innocent as he was in this world's knowledge, that he knew the priceless value, the all-ennobling virtue, of a woman who speaks the truth. But she had no courage to look at him—no courage to raise her eyes from her lap.

'Not just yet,' she said, faintly. 'Not quite so soon after we have met again.'

She rose hurriedly from her chair, and walked to the window—turned back again into the room—and approached the table, close to where he was sitting. The writing materials scattered near him, offered her a pretext for changing the subject; and she seized on it directly. 'Were you writing a letter,' she asked, 'when I came in?'

'I was thinking about it,' he replied. 'It was not a letter to be written, without thinking first.' He rose, as he answered her, to gather the writing materials together, and put them away.

‘Why should I interrupt you?’ she said. ‘Why not let me try whether I can’t help you, instead? Is it a secret?’

‘No—not a secret.’

He hesitated as he answered her. She instantly guessed the truth.

‘Is it about your ship?’

He tittle knew how she had been thinking in her absence from him, of the business which he believed that he had concealed from her. He tittle knew that she had learnt already to be jealous of his ship.

‘Do they want you to return to your old life?’ she went on. ‘Do they want you to go back to the sea? Must you say Yes or No at once?’

‘At once.’

‘If I had not come in when I did, would you have said Yes?’

She unconsciously laid her hand on his arm; forgetting all inferior considerations in her breathless anxiety to hear his next words. The confession of his love, was within a hair’s breadth of escaping him—but he checked the utterance of it even yet. ‘I don’t care for myself,’ he thought. ‘But how can I be certain of not distressing *her?’*

‘Would you have said Yes?’ she repeated.

‘I was doubting,’ he answered—‘I was doubting between Yes and No.’

Her hand tightened on his arm; a sudden trembling seized her in every limb—she could bear it no longer. All her heart went out to him, in her next words.

‘Were you doubting *for my sake?’*

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Take my confession in return for yours—I was doubting for your sake.’

She said no more—she only looked at him. In that look, the truth reached him at last. The next instant, she was folded in his arms, and was shedding delicious tears of joy, with her face hidden on his bosom.

‘Do I deserve my happiness?’ she murmured, asking the one question at last. ‘Oh, I know how the poor narrow people who have never felt and never suffered, would answer me, if I asked them what I ask you. If *they* knew my story, they would forget all the provocation, and only remember the offence—they would fasten on my sin, and pass all my suffering by. But you are not one of them? Tell me if you have any shadow of a misgiving! Tell me if you doubt that the one dear object of all my life to come, is to live worthy of you! I asked you to wait and see me; I asked you, if there was any hard truth to be told, to tell it me here, with your own lips. Tell it, my love, my husband!—tell it me now!’

She looked up, still clinging to him as she clung to the hope of her better life to come.

‘Tell me the truth!’ she repeated.

‘With my own lips?’

‘Yes!’ she answered eagerly. ‘Say what you think of me, with your own lips.’

He stooped, and kissed her.

Explanatory Notes

Virginia Blain

Note: Volume breaks occurred at the end of the Second Scene (Chapter III), page 235, and at the end of Chapter XI in the Fourth Scene, page 475. In the serial, instalment breaks occurred on the following pages: 28, 46, 66, 79, 93, 104, 117, 133, 147. 169, 184, 201, 218, 235, 250, 266, 281, 295, 308, 324, 343, 372, 389, 405, 434, 451,465, 480, 500, 514, 534, 548, 564, 583, 598, 619, 635, 653, 672, 691, 707, 723. All but three of these breaks are at the ends of chapters: the exceptions occur on page 117 (after line 21: 'The servant opened the door; and Mr Pendril went in'); page 133 (after line 24: ' "Yes: on Michael Vanstone" '); page 672 (after line 10: 'old Mazey').

Dedication

Francis Carr Beard was Collins's friend and doctor, who probably started Collins on his lifelong opium addiction during the severe illness that accompanied the last part of the writing of *No Name* . In late 1862 Collins became so dependent on Beard's support that he was not only swallowing his medicines but dictating portions of his novel to him. Beard was the first to be told of its completion on Christmas Eve, 1862.

7

The day was the fourth of March …forty-six : in a letter to his friend Charles Ward, who worked in Coutts's Bank in London, Collins put the first of many questions about exact dates, postage and shipping times, details that he wanted to have right for this novel: 'What *day* of the *week* was the 4th of March 1846? … If [it] was a *Saturday* or a *Sunday,* it won't do for my purpose.' (Letter dated 11 September 1861, held in the Pierpont Morgan Library and quoted here by permission of the Trustees.)

15

Magdalen possibly pronounced as it was sometimes spelt, 'Madlin', from the French form, Madeleine. The name Magdalen is identified with the sinner of Luke 7: 37.

Men some to business… at heart a rake" Alexander Pope, *Epistle to a Lady* (1735), 215–16.

23

the mixed train : in the 1840s this term referred to a train carrying different classes of passengers; later it came to mean one made up of both passenger carriages and goods wagons.

36

Diogenes… Rochefoucault : Diogenes, Greek philosopher of the fourth century BC, a Cynic who ridiculed and despised all intellectual pursuits which did not directly and obviously tend to some immediate and practical good. The Duc de la Rochefoucauld (1613–80) is chiefly remembered for his pithy *Maxims* which trace all human motives to self-love. Horace, Pope, Hobbes and Voltaire are, likewise, all satiric writers.

37

were received on the foundation of a well-reputed grammar-school : many grammar schools were subsidized by rich endowments dating back to their foundation in the sixteenth century.

44

the famous what's-his name : Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816). *The Rivals* was first produced in 1775.

54

Argus : sumamed 'Panoptes', 'the all-seeing', because he had a hundred eyes. He proved an ineffective guardian of Io, desired by Zeus.

78

the parliamentary train : a slow train on which passengers were charged a fare not exceeding one penny a mile. By Act of Parliament every railway company was obliged to run one such cheap train every day over its system.

125

One of Andrew's superior officers…found him : Major Kirke's name was not mentioned at this point in the serial version. Its insertion in the first volume edition (1862) brought the plot into line with the claim made in its Preface that this novel does not depend upon secrets.

137

As children bom out of wedlock in the serial version this read: 'It is the cruel particularity of the English law, that the marriage of the parents does not legitimatise children bom out of wedlock' (*All the Year Round,* 10 May 1862). But, as Collins must have learned later, even the laws of other European countries did not legitimize the offspring of subsequently married parents *when one of those parents was married to someone else when the children were bom*. In hastily trying to rectify the damage caused by the removal of this blunder, Collins was forced to introduce the circumlocutory paragraph in which Pendril explains to Miss Garth 'a shocking peculiarity in this case' (p. 138).

181

she and her sister had No Name : this, and a less oracular reference to the title of the novel (in Magdalen's letter to Norah on p. 182), were written in only after the title had been settled upon early in 1862. They do not appear in the manuscript.

182

the Great Northern terminus : despite Collins's care to present historical detail correctly, he has slipped up here. The Great Northern, which was indeed the principal route to York in 1862, did not in fact open even a temporary station in London until August 7th, 1850, the line being then in course of construction. I am indebted to Mr Steven Roberts for this information.

183

the country theatres are in a bad way . a true comment, since provincial theatres in England had declined rapidly after reaching their heyday in the second half of the eighteenth century. Collins's own interest in the theatre would have made him well aware of the many reasons that were postulated for this decline, including the rise of Methodist opposition and the poverty of the drama itself. The 1843 Act for Regulating the Theatres, by removing the monopoly of the more flourishing country theatres, in fact provided a deathblow to them all.

184

needle in a bottle of hay . in this expression bottle derives from a diminutive of the French *botte,* a bundle.

as soon find the North-West Passage : famous searches for this route to the East round the north of the American continent had gone on since Cabot's voyage in 1509, and were not successful until the early twentieth century.

186

The railway mania of that famous year : in 1846 there was a great boom in railway investment. The crash came in the spring of 1847.

188

Leaving die station … North Street Postern : York railway station was until 1877 situated inside the city walls, with closer access to the river than it has today. The ferry was replaced by Lendal Bridge in 1863.

193

a rope-walk . a piece of open ground used for the making of ropes.

199

a hit, a palpable hit : loosely quoted from *Hamlet,* V.i.295.

215

mendicity officers : the Society for the Suppression of Mendicity, founded in 1818, employed officers as professional investigators into the validity of claims for relief.

Rothschild or Baring : names of well-known banking dynasties.

229

your first benefit in a London theatre : the famous actor Charles Macready had a London benefit as late as 1848, but in fact the much-abused practice of paying actors by a share system and letting them rely for their support chiefly on the proceeds of a monthly performance held as their 'benefit' had largely been abandoned in London, though it lingered on in the provinces.

236

Charles Mathews, comedian : Charles Mathews (1776–1835), actor and entertainer, was best known for his one-man performances called 'At-Homes' in which he assumed a succession of extraordinarily different characters.

260

Belshazzar… Writing on the Wall : Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar, was the last king of Babylonia. He was killed in the sack of Babylon, a doom foretold by writing on the wall which appeared at his Feast (Dan. 5).

deserted dead body of Vauxhall Gardens : Vauxhall Gardens was a fashionable pleasure spot from the middle of the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth. The Gardens were finally closed in 1859.

267

the material called 'alpaca' : a shiny wool mixture material invented by Sir Titus Salt in 1838, using wool from the Alpaca goat.

275

chemisette : a 'fill-in' to the bodice of a day-gown cut low in front.

323

"Joyce's Scientific Dialogues" : first published in 1807 as *Scientific Dialogues for the Instruction and Entertainment of Young People: in which the first principles of Natural and Experimental Philosophy are fully explained and Illustrated,* by the Rev. J. Joyce, was many times reprinted. All of Wragge's subsequent display of scientific information is indeed, as he says, lifted straight from Joyce.

324

Verbum sap.: 'Verbum sat sapiente' 'A word to the wise is sufficient'.

Esto Perpetua : 'Be thou everlasting'.

325

Aldborough, Suffolk : usual spelling 'Aldeburgh'. The sale catalogue of books from Collins's library, published in 1890 by M. L. Bennett, lists as Item 76 a *Guide to Aldeburgh and adjacent places,* an illustrated presentation copy from the writer, 1861. The British Library holds *A Guide to Aldeburgh, with a brief description of Adjacent Places,* published anonymously in 1861, which would appear to be the same book since it contains all the information drawn upon in the descriptions of the district given in the novel.

German Ocean : now known as the North Sea.

the poet CRABBE : George Crabbe (1754–1832), son of a collector of salt duties in Aldeburgh, wrote narrative poetry based on his observations of Suffolk rural life.

336

Ars longa . .vita brevis : 'Art is long, life is short'. A translation of the first of Hippocrates' aphorisms.

356

a compute suit… nankeen : nankeen was a cotton cloth of yellowish-brown colour, usually used only for trousers.

387

Mesmerism…in these cases : mesmerism, or hypnotism as it is now termed, based on the methods of the Austrian physician Friedrich Anton Mesmer (1733–1815), was a fashionable medical treatment in the middle of the nineteenth century, particularly for nervous disorders.

401

suaviter in modo …fortiter in re : ‘gentle in manner, resolute in deed’.

421

settlements : daughters of wealthy families would generally have legal settlements drawn up when they were married, making separate provision for them. Otherwise, all married women’s property belonged by law to the husband.

432

Figaro in the French comedy : Figaro, the barber in Beaumarchais’s *Le Barbier de Seville* (1775) and the valet in its sequel, *Le Manage de Figaro* (1784), is the type of an ingenious and cunning rascal.

433

ten days. .. by post when Collins asked Charles Ward (see note to p. 7 above) to check postage times to and from Zurich he was astonished it took so long; hence the labour to make it plausible here.

443

The date : i.e. the postmark.

451

home on the spot : this is the only instance where an alteration was made to the ending of a serial episode for volume publication. The last paragraph of the serial version was omitted in the 1862 three-volume edition. It read: Captain Wragge retired to rest that night in high spirits. He jocosely apostrophised the extinguisher in his candlestick, as he raised it to put the light out. ‘If I could only drop you on Mrs Lecount,’ said the captain, ‘I might bid good-by to the last anxiety left, on this side of the wedding-day!’ *[All the Year Round,* 20 September 1862].

478

out of place : i.e. unemployed. This sense was lost after the serial version, when both 1862 and 1864 misprinted ‘out of the place’.

483

in the lock, she rose : misprinted in 1862 as ‘in the locks, he rose’. Since the subject is clearly a woman, ‘he’ made no sense, so 1864

‘corrected’ to ‘she’ but retained the error of the plural form for ‘locks’. Such an apparently sensible but uninformed correction indicates the absence of authorial supervision at this stage.

494

Spud : the iron head or blade fixed to a long handle and used for clearing mud from certain parts of a plough.

552

had left the room : misprinted in 1862 and 1864 as ‘had entered the room’.

580

marriage… in Scotland : in Scotland there is official recognition of what is termed ‘a marriage by cohabitation with habit and repute’.

597

P.S….in the North : this postscript was added in 1862 after serialization.

622

coxswain : the one in charge of the boat and its crew.

623

Brutus and Cassius : Julius Caesar’s right-hand men, who conspired in his murder.

624

made-dishes : stews or casseroles composed of several ingredients.

642

list slippers : ‘list’ was the border or selvage of cloth; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these strips of selvage joined together were used to make slippers.

644

revolution… France : this was the revolution of 1848; Louis Philippe fled to England in late February of that year (i.e. about the time this scene is set).

672

Jezabel : Jezabel, wife of Ahab, King of Israel, was supposedly a flaunting woman of loose morals (2 Kgs. 9: 30).

677

carneying . smooth talk or flattery.

696

Aaron’s Buildings : Aaron was the patriarch of the Jewish priesthood (Exod. 28); possibly connected with *haaron,* ‘the ark’.

702

surgeon in general practice : the sense of pride in Merrick’s insistence on the distinction comes from its being an assertion of his professional reliability and competence and an eschewing of the higher social status conferred upon physicians.

705

Lady Day : the feast of the Annunciation, 25 March, one of the four quarter days in the year when rents fall due.

tan : bark fragments left over from the process of tanning hides.

709

Dum vivimus, vivamus : ‘While we live, let us live’; the maxim of the Epicureans.

Aloes, Scammony, and Gamboge : all strong purgatives.

Sin nombre

Wilkie Collins

ALBA *minus*

Wilkie Collins

SIN NOMBRE

Alba Clásica

Colección dirigida por Luis Magrinyá

Título original: *No name*

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NOTA AL TEXTO

Sinnombre se publicó por primera vez, por entregas en la revista de Charles Dickens *All The Year Round* entre marzo de 1862 y enero de 1853. Su primera aparición en forma de libro, en tres volúmenes, fue en 1862. Fue reeditado en 1863 y luego, en un solo volumen y con correcciones editoriales, al año siguiente. Sobre esta edición de 1864 se basa nuestra traducción.

Para

Francis Carr Beard

(Miembro del Real Colegio de Cirujanos de

Inglaterra)

En recuerdo de la época en que se escribieron

las últimas escenas de esta historia

PREFACIO

El propósito principal de esta historia es despertar el interés del lector por un tema que han tratado algunos de los más grandes escritores, vivos o muertos, pero que ni ha sido agotado ni podrá agotarse nunca, pues se trata de un tema que interesará siempre a la humanidad. Aquí se presenta otro libro que describe la lucha de un ser humano bajo las influencias opuestas del Bien y del Mal, influencias que todos hemos sentido, que todos conocemos. En mi ánimo estaba convertir a «Magdalen», que personifica esta lucha, en un personaje patético incluso en su terquedad y su error, y he intentado con todas mis fuerzas obtener ese resultado por el medio menos importuno y menos artificial de todos: ateniéndome estrictamente, durante todo el libro, a la verdad tal como es en la Naturaleza. No ha sido fácil cumplir con este propósito, y me ha servido de gran aliento (durante la publicación de la historia en forma periódica) saber, con la autoridad que dan sus muchos lectores, que el objetivo que me había marcado puede considerarse conseguido hasta cierto punto.

Alrededor de la figura central del relato se hallarán agrupados otros personajes vividamente contrastados; contrastes, en su mayor parte, en los que me he esforzado por hacer del humor el elemento predominante. He querido conceder este alivio a los pasajes más serios del libro, no sólo porque me creía justificado por las leyes del Arte para hacerlo, sino también porque la experiencia me ha enseñado (cosa que la experiencia de mis lectores sin duda confirmará) que no existe un fenómeno moral como la tragedia pura en el mundo que nos rodea. Allá donde miremos, los hilos tristes y alegres se entrecruzan incesantemente en la textura de la vida humana.

Pasando de los personajes a la historia, el lector verá que la narración contenida en estas páginas se ha construido sobre un plan que difiere del plan seguido en mi última novela y en algunas obras mías publicadas anteriormente. El único enigma que contiene este libro se revela hacia la mitad del primer volumen. A partir de ese momento, he prefigurado deliberadamente los acontecimientos principales de la historia antes de que se produjeran con el fin de despertar el interés del lector por seguir la sucesión de circunstancias que conducen a esos acontecimientos ya previstos. El hecho de que quiera probar este nuevo terreno no supone dar la espalda al terreno ya pisado porque dude de él. Mi único objetivo al seguir esta nueva trayectoria es el de ampliar la gama de mis estudios en el arte de la ficción literaria, así como variar la forma en que puedo llamar la atención del lector del modo más atrayente posible.

No es necesario añadir más a estas líneas de introducción. Me he esforzado en hacer que el libro diga por mí lo que hubiera deseado decir aquí.

HARLEY STREET,

noviembre de 1862.

LA PRIMERA ESCENA

Combe-Raven, Somersetshire

CAPÍTULO I

Las manecillas del reloj del vestíbulo señalaban las seis y media de la mañana. El lugar era una casa solariega en West Somersetshire llamada Combe-Raven. El día era el cuatro de marzo; el año, el mil ochocientos cuarenta y seis.

Ningún sonido, salvo el tictac regular del reloj y el pesado ronquido de un gran perro, echado en una estera junto a la puerta del comedor, perturbaba la misteriosa quietud matinal del vestíbulo y la escalinata. ¿Quiénes eran los durmientes ocultos en las zonas superiores? Dejemos que la casa desvele sus propios secretos y que, uno a uno, a medida que abandonen sus lechos para bajar las escaleras, los durmientes se descubran a sí mismos.

Cuando el reloj señalaba las siete menos cuarto, el perro despertó y se sacudió. Tras aguardar en vano al lacayo, que acostumbraba dejarlo salir, el animal deambuló, nervioso, por la planta baja de una puerta cerrada a otra y, regresando a su estera sumido en una gran perplejidad, apeló a la familia dormida con un aullido largo y melancólico.

Antes de que se hubieran apagado las últimas notas de la protesta perruna, las escaleras de roble crujieron en las zonas altas de la casa bajo el peso de unos pies que descendían lentamente. Un minuto más tarde aparecía la primera de las criadas con un sucio chal de lana sobre los hombros, pues la mañana era desapacible y el reumatismo y la cocinera eran viejos amigos.

Tras recibir las primeras demostraciones cordiales del perro con el peor humor posible, la cocinera abrió despacio la puerta del vestíbulo y dejó salir al animal. La mañana amenazaba tormenta. Sobre una amplia extensión de césped y tras una negra plantación de abetos, el sol se abría camino entre grises nubarrones; caían gruesas gotas de lluvia de vez en cuando; el viento de marzo se estremecía por las esquinas de la casa y los árboles mojados se mecían cansinamente.

Dieron las siete, y los signos de vida doméstica empezaron a sucederse con mayor rapidez.

Bajó la camarera; alta y esbelta, con la temperatura primaveral escrita en rojo en la nariz. Le siguió la doncella de la señora; joven, espabilada, regordeta y soñolienta. A continuación apareció la pinche de cocina; afectada de un tic doloroso en la cara y sin pretender disimular sus sufrimientos. En último lugar bajó el lacayo, bostezando desconsoladamente; imagen viviente de un hombre que sentía que le habían robado su justo descanso nocturno.

La conversación de los sirvientes, cuando se reunieron ante el fuego de la cocina, que prendía lentamente, se refirió a un reciente acontecimiento familiar y principió con esta pregunta: ¿Había tenido Thomas, el lacayo, ocasión de oír el concierto de Clifton, al que habían acudido el amo y las dos señoritas la noche anterior? Sí, Thomas había asistido al concierto; le habían dado dinero para que se sentara en el gallinero; fue un concierto muy sonoro; fue un concierto muy caldeado; en la cabecera de los programas lo describían como grandioso; si merecía la pena recorrer veinticinco kilómetros de ida en ferrocarril, con la dificultad adicional de volver treinta kilómetros por carretera a la una y media de la madrugada, era una cuestión que dejaría que decidieran el amo y las señoritas; mientras tanto, en su propia opinión y sin dudarlo, no, no la merecía. Nuevas

preguntas por parte de todas las criadas, una tras otra, no obtuvieron información adicional de ningún tipo. Thomas no podía tararear ninguna de las canciones ni describir ninguno de los vestidos de las damas. Su público, por tanto, lo dejó por imposible, y la conversación intrascendente de la cocina volvió a sus cauces habituales hasta que el reloj dio las ocho y sobresaltó a los sirvientes reunidos, que se separaron para realizar sus tareas de la mañana.

Las ocho y cuarto y no ocurrió nada. Las ocho y media, y aparecieron más signos de vida procedentes de los dormitorios. El siguiente miembro de la familia que bajó las escaleras fue el señor Andrew Vanstone, el dueño de la casa.

Alto, corpulento y erguido, con brillantes ojos azules y un saludable cutis colorado, vestía una chaqueta de cazador afelpada con los botones mal abrochados; su pequeño y zorruno terrier escocés ladraba tras él sin ser reprendido; con una mano metida en el bolsillo del chaleco y la otra palmeando la barandilla alegremente mientras bajaba tarareando una melodía, el señor Vanstone mostraba sin reservas su carácter a sus semejantes, tanto por su actitud como por su aspecto. Era un caballero amable, campechano, bien parecido y de buen talante, que caminaba por el lado más optimista de la vida y que no pedía nada mejor que encontrarse también en ese lado con todos sus compañeros de viaje en el mundo. Estimando su edad en años, había cumplido los cincuenta. Juzgándolo por la ligereza de su corazón, la fortaleza de su constitución y su capacidad para divertirse, no era mayor que la mayoría de los hombres con los treinta recién cumplidos.

- ¡Thomas! -gritó el señor Vanstone, cogiendo su viejo sombrero de fieltro y su grueso bastón de la mesa del vestíbulo-. Esta mañana el desayuno a las diez. No es probable que las señoritas bajen pronto después del concierto de anoche. A propósito, ¿qué te pareció el concierto a ti, eh? ¿Te pareció grandioso? Muy cierto, lo era. No era más que pim pam con algún que otro pam pim; todas las mujeres vestidas casi a riesgo de sus vidas; un calor asfixiante, gas ardiente y nada de espacio; sí, sí, Thomas, grandioso es la palabra exacta, y cómodo no. -Tras este comentario, el señor Vanstone silbó a su terrier zorruno, agitó el bastón en la puerta del vestíbulo desafiando alegremente la lluvia y emprendió su paseo matinal contra viento y marea.

Las manecillas señalaban las nueve menos diez en su firme recorrido por la esfera del reloj. Otro miembro de la familia apareció en las escaleras: la señorita Garth, la institutriz.

Ningún ojo observador se habría posado en la señorita Garth sin darse cuenta de inmediato de que era una mujer del campo y además del norte. Su rostro de duras facciones, su disposición masculina y su decisión de movimiento, su obstinada sinceridad en la mirada y las maneras, todo delataba que había nacido y se había educado en la frontera con Escocia. Pese a tener poco más de cuarenta años, sus cabellos eran completamente grises, y los cubría con la sencilla cofia de una vieja. Ni cabellos ni tocado desentonaban con el rostro, que aparentaba más años y llevaba el grueso trazo de las penurias pasadas profundamente grabado en él. El dominio de sí misma que demostraba en su descenso y el aire de autoridad habitual con el que posaba su mirada en derredor revelaba la posición que ocupaba en la familia del señor Vanstone. Era evidente que no se trataba de esa clase de institutrices desesperadas, acuciadas por la necesidad y penosamente dependientes. Teníamos aquí a una mujer que vivía en términos seguros y honorables con sus señores; una mujer que parecía capaz de poner en su sitio a cualquier padre inglés que no la considerara en su justo valor.

- ¿El desayuno a las diez? -repitió la señorita Garth cuando el lacayo contestó a la llamada y mencionó las órdenes del amo-. ¡Ja! Ya sabía yo lo que saldría de ese concierto de anoche. Cuando la gente que vive en el campo patrocina entretenimientos públicos, los entretenimientos públicos le devuelven el cumplido trastornando la vida familiar durante varios días. Tú estás trastornado, Thomas, ya lo veo. Tienes los ojos rojos como los de un hurón y parece que hayas dormido con el corbatín puesto. Trae la tetera a las diez menos cuarto y si no mejoras en el transcurso del día, ven a verme y te daré un remedio. Es un muchacho bienintencionado, si se le deja en paz -continuó la

señorita Garth en soliloquio, cuando Thomas ya se había retirado-, pero no es lo bastante fuerte para irse a oír conciertos a treinta kilómetros. Querían que fuera con ellos. Sí, sí, ¡ya pueden esperarme sentados!

Dieron las nueve; y el minutero tuvo que avanzar otros veinte minutos antes de que se oyeran más pasos en la escalera. En ese momento aparecieron dos señoras que descendían juntas hacia el comedor: la señora Vanstone y su hija mayor.

Si el atractivo personal de la señora Vanstone en una época más temprana de su vida había dependido sólo de los encantos genuinamente ingleses de su cutis y su frescura, debía de hacer mucho tiempo que se perdieron los últimos vestigios de belleza. Pero su hermosura, cuando era joven, había sobrepasado la media nacional y conservaba aún la ventaja de sus cualidades personales más sobresalientes. Pese a que tenía cuarenta y cuatro años, pese a que había sufrido en tiempos pretéritos la pérdida prematura de más de un hijo, y largas enfermedades después a causa de aquellas pérdidas, sus rasgos conservaban las hermosas proporciones de delicadeza sutil, en otro tiempo asociadas al resplandor y la frescura de la belleza que la habían abandonado para siempre. La hija mayor, que bajaba las escaleras a su lado, era el espejo en el que podía mirar hacia atrás y ver de nuevo el reflejo de su propia juventud. Allí, en gruesos tirabuzones, ostentaba la cabeza de su hija la espesa cabellera negra que en la madre encanecía rápidamente. Allí, en las mejillas de la hija, relucía el tono rojo oscuro que se había desvanecido de las mejillas maternas y que no volvería a florecer. La señorita Vanstone había alcanzado ya la primera madurez como mujer; había cumplido los veintiséis años. Habiendo heredado el oscuro carácter majestuoso de la belleza de su madre, no poseía, sin embargo, todos sus encantos. Pese a que el óvalo del rostro era el mismo, las facciones no eran tan delicadas ni sus proporciones tan exactas. No era tan alta como ella. Tenía los mismos ojos castaños, penetrantes y suaves, con el brillo perenne que habían perdido los de la señora Vanstone, y sin embargo había menos interés, menos distinción y menos profundidad de sentimiento en su expresión, que era afable y femenina, pero ensombrecida por cierta reserva silenciosa de la que el rostro de su madre carecía por completo. Si osáramos acercarnos más aún, ¿no observaríamos que la fuerza moral del carácter y las más elevadas facultades intelectuales de los padres a menudo parecen desvanecerse misteriosamente en el proceso de transmisión a los hijos? En estos tiempos de dañino agotamiento psíquico y enfermedades nerviosas de sutil propagación, ¿no es posible que pueda aplicarse la misma regla, con mayor frecuencia de la que estamos dispuestos a aceptar, también a los dones corporales?

La madre y la hija descendían lentamente por la escalinata; la primera con un vestido marrón oscuro y un chal indio sobre los hombros; la segunda sencillamente ataviada de negro, con cuello, puños y una cinta naranja sobre la pechera del vestido. Mientras atravesaban el vestíbulo en dirección al comedor, la señorita Vanstone no hablaba de otra cosa que del absorbente tema del concierto de la víspera.

- Siento muchísimo, mamá, que no vinieras con nosotros -decía-. Has estado tan fuerte y tan bien desde el verano pasado, te sentías más joven, como tú misma decías, que estoy segura de que no hubiera supuesto un esfuerzo excesivo.

- Quizá no, cariño, pero es mejor prevenir que curar.

- Desde luego -señaló la señorita Garth, apareciendo en la puerta del comedor-. Fíjese en Norah (buenos días, querida), fíjese, digo, en Norah. Es un auténtico desecho, una prueba viviente de su sensatez y la mía al quedarnos en casa. El infame gas, el aire viciado, trasnochar, ¿qué puede esperarse? No es de hierro y sufre las consecuencias. No, querida, no lo niegues. Se nota que te duele la cabeza.

Una sonrisa iluminó el hermoso rostro moreno de Norah, y luego su acostumbrada reserva volvió a ensombrecerlo ligeramente.

- Un dolor de cabeza muy leve, ni siquiera suficiente para hacerme lamentar el concierto -dijo, y se alejó en dirección a la ventana.

En el extremo más apartado del jardín y del potrero se veía un arroyo, más allá unas

cuantas granjas y la entrada de un desfiladero rocoso y arbolado (al que en Somersetshire se da el nombre de combe) que allí se abría paso hendiendo las colinas que ocultaban el horizonte. Un tramo de sinuosa carretera era visible a una cierta distancia, no excesiva, en medio de las lomas, a campo abierto, y caminando por ese tramo se reconocía fácilmente la figura robusta del señor Vanstone, que regresaba a casa tras su paseo matinal. Agitó el bastón alegremente al ver a su hija mayor en la ventana. Ésta asintió y saludó a su vez con la mano, demostrando una gracia exquisita, pero en sus maneras había una anticuada formalidad que parecía extraña en una mujer tan joven, poco acorde con el saludo dirigido a un padre.

El reloj del vestíbulo dio la hora señalada para el desayuno aplazado. Cuando el minutero registró un lapso de tiempo de cinco minutos más, se oyó un portazo en los dormitorios y una voz joven y clara que cantaba alegremente; unos pasos rápidos y ligeros resonaron en las escaleras superiores, aterrizaron de un salto en el descansillo y volvieron a sonar más rápidos que antes al iniciar el último tramo. Instantes después, la menor de las dos hijas del señor Vanstone (y únicas supervivientes de su progenie) apareció a la vista en las viejas y deslustradas escaleras de roble de la misma manera imprevista que un relámpago, y, salvando los tres últimos escalones de un salto hasta el vestíbulo, se presentó sin aliento en el comedor para completar el círculo familiar.

Por uno de esos extraños caprichos de la Naturaleza que la ciencia aún no ha explicado, la menor de las hijas del señor Vanstone no se parecía a ninguno de sus progenitores. ¿De dónde habían salido aquellos cabellos?, ¿de dónde aquellos ojos? Incluso sus padres se hicieron tales preguntas cuando la niña se convirtió en jovencita, y su honda perplejidad les impedía responderlas. Su cabello era de ese tono castaño claro puro, libre del amarillo y el rojo, que se ve más a menudo en el plumaje de un ave que en la cabeza de un ser humano. Era suave y abundante, y caía desde su frente baja en una cascada de ondas; pero, a gusto de algunos, era apagado y muerto por su absoluta falta de brillo, por la monótona pureza de su color claro. Tenía las cejas y las pestañas apenas más oscuras que el cabello y parecían hechas expresamente para esos ojos entre violeta y azul que muestran su encanto más irresistible cuando se unen a una tez blanca. Pero era ahí exactamente donde la promesa de su rostro fallaba del modo más estrepitoso. Los ojos, que deberían haber sido oscuros, eran de una incomprensible y discordante claridad; tenían ese gris casi incoloro que, pese a ser poco atractivo en sí mismo, se compensa con el raro mérito de interpretar las más pequeñas gradaciones del pensamiento, los cambios más leves de las emociones y los más profundos trastornos de la pasión con una sutil transparencia expresiva que los ojos más oscuros no pueden igualar. Esta singular contradicción de la parte superior de su rostro respecto al concepto establecido sobre la armonía no era menos evidente en la parte inferior. Los labios poseían una auténtica delicadeza femenina en la forma, sus mejillas tenían la encantadora redondez y suavidad de la juventud, pero la boca era demasiado grande y firme, el mentón demasiado cuadrado y fuerte para su sexo y su edad. El cutis compartía la monotonía de matices puros que caracterizaba sus cabellos; era todo él de un suave y cálido tono blanco sin un matiz de color en las mejillas, salvo cuando realizaba un desacostumbrado ejercicio físico o experimentaba una súbita perturbación mental. Todo su rostro -tan extraordinario por sus características diametralmente opuestas- resultaba más llamativo si cabe por su increíble movilidad. Los grandes ojos eléctricos de color gris claro no conocían prácticamente el reposo; todas las variedades de expresión se sucedían unas a otras en el semblante moldeable y cambiante, con una rapidez vertiginosa que, en la carrera, dejaba atrás el frío análisis. La exuberante vitalidad de la joven se manifestaba en todo su cuerpo, de los pies a la cabeza. Su figura -era más alta que su hermana, más alta de lo normal en una mujer; poseedora de una flexibilidad tan seductora y sinuosa, con una gracilidad tan ligera y juguetona, que sus movimientos sugerían, con toda naturalidad, los movimientos de una gata joven-, su figura estaba tan perfectamente desarrollada que, viéndola, nadie imaginaría que tuviera tan sólo dieciocho años. Exhibía la rotunda madurez física de los veinte años o más; una plenitud natural e irresistible en concordancia con una salud y una fuerza incomparables. Ahí estaba el auténtico origen de esta organización extrañamente constituida. Su impetuoso descenso por las escaleras de la casa; la brusca actividad de

todos sus movimientos; la chispa incesante de su fisonomía; la alegría contagiosa que tomaba al asalto los corazones de las personas más tranquilas; incluso el deleite irreflexivo en los colores brillantes que se traslucía en el vistoso vestido matinal de rayas, en las cintas ondeantes, en las grandes escarapelas escarlata de sus elegantes y pequeños zapatos; todo emanaba por igual de la misma fuente, de la desbordante salud física que fortalecía cada uno de sus músculos y nervios, y que hacía vibrar la sangre joven y cálida en sus venas como la sangre de un niño en edad de crecer.

Al entrar en el comedor recibió la habitual amonestación que su frívola indiferencia por la puntualidad solía provocar en las sufridas autoridades de la casa. Citando la frase favorita de la señorita Garth: «Magdalen nació con todos los sentidos, excepto el sentido del orden».

¡Magdalen! ¿Era un nombre extraño para ella? Extraño en verdad y, sin embargo, elegido en circunstancias de lo más corrientes. Era el nombre de una de las hermanas del señor Vanstone que había muerto muy joven, y éste se lo había puesto a su segunda hija como afectuoso recuerdo, del mismo modo que había llamado Norah a su hija mayor en honor a su mujer. ¡Magdalen! ¿No era evidente que el magnífico y antiguo nombre bíblico -que sugería una dignidad triste y sombría, y se asociaba en un principio con lúgubres ideas de penitencia y aislamiento- se había otorgado en este caso inapropiadamente, a la luz de los acontecimientos posteriores? ¡Era obvio que aquella contradictoria joven había consumado perversamente una contradicción más al desarrollar un carácter totalmente en desacuerdo con su propio nombre!

- ¡Otra vez llegas tarde! -dijo la señora Vanstone, al recibir el beso de una Magdalen sin resuello.

- ¡Otra vez llegas tarde! -intervino la señorita Garth, cuando Magdalen se acercó a ella-. ¿Y bien? -continuó, sujetando familiarmente la barbilla de la joven con una atención entre satírica y cariñosa que delataba que la hija pequeña, pese a sus defectos, era la preferida de la institutriz-. ¿Y bien? ¿Qué efecto ha tenido el concierto sobre ti? ¿Qué forma de sufrimiento ha infligido la disipación en tu organismo esta mañana?

- ¡Sufrimiento! -repitió Magdalen, recobrando el aliento y el uso del habla-. No conozco el significado de esa palabra. Si algo me pasa, es que estoy demasiado bien. ¡Sufrimiento! Estoy dispuesta a asistir a otro concierto esta noche, y a un baile mañana, y a una obra de teatro al día siguiente. ¡Oh! -exclamó Magdalen, dejándose caer en una silla y cruzando las manos con entusiasmo sobre la mesa-. ¡Cómo me gusta el placer!

- ¡Vaya! Desde luego eso sí que es explícito -dijo la señorita Garth-. Creo que Pope debía estar pensando en ti cuando escribió sus famosos versos:

De los hombres, unos aman el trabajo, otros el placer,

- ¡El diablo es! -exclamó el señor Vanstone entrando en la habitación a mitad de la cita, seguido de los perros-. Bueno, vivir para ver. Si todas ustedes son unas libertinas, señorita Garth, es que los sexos se han intercambiado de verdad, y a los hombres no les quedará más remedio que permanecer en casa zurciendo calcetines. Vamos a desayunar.

- ¿Cómo estás, papá? -dijo Magdalen, rodeando el cuello del señor Vanstone con tanto ímpetu como si su padre perteneciera a un tipo más grande de perro Terranova y sirviera sólo para que ella retozara a su antojo-. Yo soy la libertina a la que se refiere la señorita Garth y quiero ir a otro concierto, o a una obra de teatro si quieres, o a un baile si lo prefieres, o a cualquier otra diversión que me permita estrenar vestido, me sumerja en una multitud de gente y me ilumine con abundante luz y me haga sentir un hormigueo de emoción por todo el cuerpo, de los pies a la cabeza. Cualquier cosa servirá mientras no nos envíe a la cama a las once.

El señor Vanstone se sentó tranquilamente mientras seguía el torrente de palabras de su hija, como hombre acostumbrado a semejantes inundaciones verbales.

- Si se me permite escoger el tipo de diversión la próxima vez -dijo el digno caballero-, creo que una obra de teatro me satisfaría más que un concierto. Las chicas disfrutaron de lo lindo, querida -continuó, dirigiéndose a su mujer-. Más que yo, debo confesar. Superó por completo mi capacidad de aguante. Tocaron una pieza que duró cuarenta minutos. Se interrumpió tres veces, por cierto, y todos pensamos que había concluido cada vez y aplaudimos, contentos de librarnos por fin, pero entonces vuelta a empezar, con gran sorpresa y mortificación por nuestra parte, hasta que nos rendimos de pura desesperación, deseando hallarnos en Jericó. ¡Norah, querida!, cuando estuvimos escuchando pim pam durante cuarenta minutos, con tres pausas, por cierto, ¿cómo lo llamaron?

- Sinfonía, papá -contestó Norah.

- Sí, querido y viejo godo, ¡una sinfonía del gran Beethoven! -añadió Magdalen-. ¿Cómo puedes decir que no te divertiste? ¿Has olvidado a la mujer extranjera de piel amarilla con un nombre impronunciable? ¿No recuerdas las caras que ponía al cantar y el modo en que hacía reverencias sin parar hasta que engañó a los estúpidos para que gritaran pidiendo más? ¡Mira, mamá, mire, señorita Garth!

Magdalen cogió un plato vacío de la mesa con el que representó una partitura, lo sostuvo ante ella en la posición acostumbrada en los conciertos y realizó una imitación de las muecas y reverencias de la infortunada cantante con tal precisión y fidelidad al original que su padre prorrumpió en carcajadas, e incluso el lacayo (que entraba en ese momento con la bolsa del correo) volvió a salir precipitadamente de la habitación y cometió la falta de decoro de hacerse eco audible de la risa de su amo al otro lado de la puerta.

- Cartas, papá. Dame la llave -dijo Magdalen, pasando de la imitación junto a la mesa del desayuno a la bolsa del correo del aparador con la brusca soltura que caracterizaba todas sus acciones.

El señor Vanstone buscó en sus bolsillos y meneó la cabeza. Aunque su hija menor no se pareciera a él en nada más, era fácil ver de dónde procedían las anárquicas costumbres de Magdalen.

- Creo que me la he dejado en la biblioteca con las demás llaves -dijo el señor Vanstone-. Ve a por ella, querida.

- Deberías controlar a Magdalen -intervino la señora Vanstone, dirigiéndose a su

marido, cuando su hija abandonó la habitación-. Está adquiriendo la costumbre de hacer imitaciones y te habla con una ligereza que resulta absolutamente escandalosa.

- Eso mismo digo yo. Estoy harta de repetirlo -comentó la señorita Garth-. Magdalen trata al señor Vanstone como si fuera un hermano menor.

- Eres bueno con nosotras en todo lo demás, papá, y te muestras indulgente con la gran vitalidad de Magdalen, ¿verdad? -dijo la sosegada Norah, poniéndose de parte del padre y la hermana con tan escasa muestra de resolución en la superficie que pocos observadores hubieran tenido perspicacia bastante para detectar la auténtica esencia subyacente.

- Gracias, querida -dijo el bonachón señor Vanstone-. Gracias por tan bonitas palabras. En cuanto a Magdalen -continuó, dirigiéndose a su esposa y a la señorita Garth-, es una potra sin domar. Dejadla que patee el suelo y que haga cabriolas en el potrero si es feliz así. Tiempo habrá de acostumbrarla al arnés cuando sea un poco mayor.

Se abrió la puerta y regresó Magdalen con la llave. Abrió la bolsa del correo y desparramó las cartas, que cayeron en montón. Las clasificó alegremente en menos de un minuto, se acercó a la mesa del desayuno con las manos llenas y repartió las cartas con la eficiente rapidez de un cartero de Londres.

- Dos para Norah -anunció, empezando por su hermana-. Tres para la señorita Garth. Para mamá ninguna. Una para mí. Y las otras seis para papá. Mi querido y viejo perezoso, odias contestar cartas, ¿verdad? -prosiguió Magdalen, dejando el personaje de cartero para asumir el de hija-. ¡Cómo refunfuñarás y te impacientarás en el estudio! ¡Y cómo desearás que no existan en el mundo esas cosas llamadas cartas! ¡Y cómo se pondrá de roja esa bonita y vieja calva tuya por la preocupación de redactar las respuestas, y cuántas de ellas acabarás dejando para mañana! El teatro de Bristol ha iniciado la temporada, papá -susurró de repente y de forma furtiva en la oreja de su padre-. Lo he visto en el periódico cuando he ido a por la llave. ¡Vamos mañana por la noche!

Mientras su hija parloteaba, el señor Vanstone clasificaba las cartas mecánicamente. Dio la vuelta sucesivamente a las cuatro primeras y miró los remites con indiferencia. Cuando llegó a la quinta, su atención, que se había desplazado entonces hacia Magdalen, se fijó de repente en el matasellos.

Inclinándose sobre él, con la cabeza sobre su hombro, Magdalen vio el matasellos con tanta claridad como su padre: Nueva Orleáns.

- ¡Una carta de América, papá! -exclamó-. ¿A quién conoces en Nueva Orleáns?

La señora Vanstone dio un respingo y miró con expresión anhelante a su marido en cuanto Magdalen pronunció aquellas palabras.

El señor Vanstone no dijo nada. Se quitó tranquilamente del cuello el brazo de su hija, como si deseara librarse de cualquier interrupción. Magdalen regresó a su silla. Con la carta en la mano, su padre aguardó un poco antes de abrirla, mientras su madre lo miraba con una ansiosa expectación que atrajo la atención de la señorita Garth y la de Norah, así como la de Magdalen.

Tras unos instantes más de vacilación, el señor Vanstone abrió la carta.

Su faz mudó de color en cuanto leyó las primeras líneas; sus mejillas pasaron a un apagado tono marrón amarillento, que hubiera sido palidez cenicienta en un hombre menos rubicundo, y su expresión se entristeció y ensombreció en un momento. Norah y Magdalen, que lo contemplaban con ansiedad, no vieron más que el cambio experimentado por su padre. Sólo la señorita Garth observó el efecto que ese cambio producía en la atenta señora de la casa.

No era un efecto que hubiera podido esperar la señorita Garth, ni cualquier otra persona. La señora Vanstone parecía ilusionada más que alarmada. Un leve rubor le

cubrió las mejillas, los ojos se le iluminaron, removía el té una y otra vez con una impaciencia y un nerviosismo que no eran naturales en ella.

En su calidad de niña mimada, Magdalen fue, como de costumbre, la primera en romper el silencio.

- ¿Qué ocurre, papá? -preguntó.

- Nada -respondió el señor Vanstone con brusquedad, sin alzar la vista.

- Estoy segura de que ocurre algo -insistió Magdalen-. Estoy segura de que en esa carta americana hay malas noticias, papá.

- En la carta no hay nada que te concierna -dijo el señor Vanstone.

Era el primer desaire directo que Magdalen recibía de su padre. Lo miró con incrédula sorpresa, que hubiera sido irresistiblemente absurda en otras circunstancias menos serias.

Nada más se dijo. Por primera vez, quizá, en sus vidas, los miembros de la familia desayunaron en medio de un penoso silencio. El excelente apetito matutino del señor Vanstone se esfumó junto con su excelente humor matinal. Con aire ausente partió unos trozos de tostada del plato que tenía al lado, con aire ausente terminó su primera taza de té y luego pidió una segunda que dejó sin probar en la mesa.

- Norah -dijo después de un intervalo-, no es necesario que me esperes. Magdalen, querida, puedes irte cuando quieras.

Sus hijas se levantaron de inmediato y la señorita Garth tuvo la delicadeza de seguir su ejemplo. Cuando un hombre de carácter bonachón se hace valer en su familia, lo insólito de su demostración tiene su efecto invariablemente y la voluntad de ese hombre bonachón es ley.

- ¿Qué habrá ocurrido? -susurró Norah, cuando cerraron la puerta del comedor y atravesaron el vestíbulo.

- ¿A qué ha venido que papá se enfadara conmigo? -exclamó Magdalen, irritada porque se sentía dolida.

- ¿Puedo preguntarte qué derecho tenías a curiosear en los asuntos personales de tu padre? -replicó la señorita Garth.

- ¿Derecho? -repitió Magdalen-. Yo no tengo secretos para papá, ¡con qué derecho tiene él secretos para mí! Me considero insultada.

- Si te consideras debidamente reprendida por entrometerte en asuntos ajenos -dijo la franca señorita Garth-, estarás un poquito más cerca de la verdad. ¡Ah!, eres como todas las jóvenes de hoy en día. Ni una sola en un centenar sabe dónde están sus límites.

Las tres señoras entraron en la salita, y Magdalen respondió al reproche de la señorita Garth dando un portazo.

Transcurrida media hora, ni el señor Vanstone ni su esposa habían abandonado el comedor. El criado, ignorante de lo que había ocurrido, entró para quitar la mesa, halló a sus amos sentados juntos y en íntima conversación, y volvió a salir inmediatamente. Otro cuarto de hora pasó antes de que se abriera la puerta del comedor y la entrevista privada entre marido y mujer tocara a su fin.

- Oigo a mamá en el vestíbulo -dijo Norah-. Quizá venga a decirnos alguna cosa.

La señora Vanstone entró en la salita mientras hablaba su hija. Tenía las mejillas arreboladas y en sus ojos brillaban aún las lágrimas a medio enjugar; su paso era más vivo y sus movimientos más bruscos de lo habitual.

- Traigo noticias, queridas mías, que os sorprenderán -dijo a sus hijas-. Vuestro padre y yo nos vamos a Londres mañana.

Magdalen cogió a su madre por el brazo, muda de asombro; la señorita Garth dejó caer su labor sobre el regazo; incluso la reposada Norah hizo ademán de levantarse y repitió, atónita, las palabras: «¡A Londres!».

- ¿Sin nosotras? -añadió Magdalen.

- Vuestro padre y yo iremos solos -dijo la señora Vanstone-. Tal vez nos quedemos hasta tres semanas, pero no más. Vamos a -vaciló-, vamos a ocuparnos de un importante asunto familiar. No me sujetes, Magdalen. Es inesperado, pero necesario. Tengo muchas cosas que hacer hoy, muchas cosas que arreglar antes de mañana. Vamos, vamos, cariño, suéltame.

La señora Vanstone apartó el brazo, besó apresuradamente a su hija menor en la frente y abandonó la estancia sin más. Incluso Magdalen comprendió que no iba a persuadir a su madre de que escuchara ni respondiera a más preguntas.

La mañana avanzaba lentamente y el señor Vanstone no aparecía. Con la curiosidad irreflexiva de su edad y su carácter, Magdalen desafió la prohibición de la señorita Garth y las protestas de su hermana, resuelta a ir al estudio en busca de su padre. Cuando probó a abrir la puerta, la halló cerrada desde dentro.

- Soy yo, papá -dijo, y aguardó.

- Ahora estoy ocupado, querida -fue la respuesta-. No me molestes.

A su manera, la señora Vanstone se mostró igualmente inaccesible. Permaneció en su habitación rodeada de las criadas de la casa, inmersa en interminables preparativos para la inminente partida. Los criados, poco acostumbrados a decisiones repentinas y órdenes inesperadas, obedecieron las instrucciones confusos y con torpeza. Corrían de una habitación a otra innecesariamente y perdían tiempo y paciencia empujándose unos a otros en las escaleras. Si hubiera entrado un extraño en la casa ese día, habría podido imaginar que había acaecido en ella un inesperado desastre en lugar de una imprevista necesidad de marcharse a Londres. La rutina diaria se desbarató por completo. Magdalen, que solía pasar la mañana al piano, deambuló con nerviosismo por escaleras y pasillos, entrando y saliendo de la casa cuando se vislumbraba el buen tiempo. Norah, cuya afición por la lectura habíase convertido en proverbial, cogía un libro tras otro de mesas y estantes y volvía a dejarlos, incapaz de concentrarse. Incluso la señorita Garth acusó la influencia omnipresente de la desorganización doméstica y no se movió de su asiento junto al hogar de la salita, dejando la labor a un lado y sacudiendo la cabeza con un gesto ominoso.

«¿Asuntos familiares? -Se dijo la señorita Garth, reflexionando sobre la vaga explicación de la señora Vanstone-. Hace doce años que vivo en Combe-Raven y éstos son los primeros asuntos familiares que se han interpuesto entre padres e hijas, según mi experiencia. ¿Qué significarán? ¿Cambios? Supongo que me hago vieja. No me gustan los cambios.»

CAPÍTULO II

A las diez de la mañana siguiente, Norah y Magdalen se hallaban solas en el vestíbulo de Combe-Raven contemplando la partida del carruaje que llevaría a sus padres al tren de Londres.

Hasta el último momento, ambas hermanas habían esperado recibir alguna explicación sobre aquellos misteriosos «asuntos familiares» a los que la señora Vanstone tan brevemente había aludido el día anterior. No se la habían ofrecido. Ni siquiera el nerviosismo de la despedida en circunstancias absolutamente nuevas para la vida hogareña de padres e hijas había quebrantado la resuelta discreción de los señores Vanstone. Se habían marchado con los más cálidos testimonios de afecto, repitiendo abrazos de despedida una y otra vez, pero sin dejar caer una sola palabra sobre la naturaleza de su asunto.

Cuando el chirrido de las ruedas del carruaje cesó de repente en una curva de la carretera, las hermanas se miraron, dejando traslucir cada una a su modo la terrible sensación de que sus padres les habían negado su confianza por primera vez. La habitual reserva de Norah se convirtió en hosco silencio; se sentó en una de las sillas del vestíbulo y miró hacia fuera a través de la puerta abierta, con el entrecejo fruncido. Magdalen, como era su costumbre cuando se enojaba, expresó su descontento en los términos más directos.

- No importa que se enteren. ¡Creo que las dos hemos sido tratadas de manera vergonzosa! -Tras estas palabras, la joven siguió el ejemplo de su hermana sentándose en una silla del vestíbulo y mirando sin objeto a través de la puerta abierta de la casa.

Prácticamente en aquel mismo momento la señorita Garth salió de la salita al vestíbulo. Su rápida capacidad de observación le mostró la necesidad de intervenir con un propósito práctico, y su despierto sentido común le indicó de inmediato cuál debía ser.

- Alzad la vista las dos, si me hacéis el favor, y escuchadme -dijo-. Si hemos de vivir a gusto y felices las tres ahora que estamos solas, tenemos que respetar nuestras costumbres de siempre y seguir adelante con normalidad. Éste es el estado de cosas, en pocas palabras. Aceptad la situación, como dicen los franceses. Aquí estoy yo para daros ejemplo. Acabo de ordenar que sirvan una comida excelente a la hora acostumbrada. A continuación me dirijo al botiquín en busca de la medicina para la pinche, una muchacha enfermiza cuyo tic no es más que un problema estomacal. Mientras tanto, Norah, querida, encontrarás tu trabajo y tus libros en la biblioteca, como siempre. Magdalen, ¿qué te parece si en lugar de hacer nudos en tu pañuelo, utilizas los dedos sobre las teclas del piano? Comeremos a la una y luego sacaremos a los perros. Quiero veros a ambas tan activas y animadas como yo. Vamos, levantaos inmediatamente. Si vuelvo a ver esos rostros lúgubres, como me llamo Garth que dejaré un aviso de despido para vuestra madre y me volveré con mis familiares en el tren mixto de las doce cuarenta.

Concluyendo su discurso de amonestación en estos términos, la señorita Garth condujo a Norah a la puerta de la biblioteca, empujó a Magdalen a la salita y se encaminó con rostro serio al lugar donde se hallaba el botiquín.

A su particular manera, medio en broma medio en serio, estaba acostumbrada a mantener una suerte de autoridad amistosa sobre las hijas del señor Vanstone, una vez que sus funciones como institutriz habían llegado necesariamente a su fin. Ni que decir tiene que Norah había dejado de ser su pupila desde hacía mucho tiempo, y también Magdalen había completado ya su educación. Pero la señorita Garth había vivido demasiado tiempo bajo el techo del señor Vanstone y de un modo demasiado íntimo para separarse de ella por cuestiones puramente formales, de manera que la primera insinuación sobre su marcha que había considerado un deber formular fue desechada con tan cálidas y afectuosas protestas que jamás volvió a repetirla, a no ser en broma. A partir de aquel momento se dejó en sus manos la dirección de todos los asuntos

domésticos; a esos deberes era libre de añadir la ayuda amistosa que pudiera prestar a las lecturas de Norah y la amistosa supervisión que pudiera aún ejercer sobre la música de Magdalen. Tales eran las condiciones en las que la señorita Garth residía en el seno de la familia Vanstone.

A primera hora de la tarde el tiempo mejoró. A la una y media el sol brillaba con fuerza, y las señoras abandonaron la casa acompañadas por los perros para emprender su paseo.

Cruzaron el arroyo y ascendieron por el pequeño desfiladero rocoso hacia las colinas del otro lado, luego giraron a la izquierda y regresaron por un camino que atravesaba la aldea de Combe-Raven.

Cuando tuvieron a la vista las primeras casitas, pasaron por delante de un hombre que deambulaba por el camino y que miró atentamente, primero a Magdalen y luego a Norah. Ellas se limitaron a observar que era de baja estatura, que vestía de negro y que era un completo desconocido; luego continuaron el paseo sin pensar más en el caminante que habían encontrado merodeando de vuelta a casa.

Tras dejar atrás la aldea y entrar en el camino que conducía directamente a la casa, Magdalen sorprendió a la señorita Garth anunciando que aquel desconocido vestido de negro se había dado la vuelta al pasar ellas y que las seguía.

- Se mantiene en el lado del camino por el que va Norah -añadió maliciosamente-. No soy yo quien le atrae; no me echéis la culpa.

Que el hombre las siguiera o no carecía de importancia, pues se hallaban cerca ya de la casa. Cuando llegaron a la casa del guarda y traspasaron la verja, la señorita Garth miró hacia atrás y vio que el desconocido avivaba el paso con la intención aparente de trabar conversación. Viendo esto, ordenó de inmediato a las jóvenes que entraran en la casa con los perros, mientras ella aguardaba los acontecimientos junto a la verja.

Tuvieron el tiempo justo de llevar a cabo este discreto arreglo antes de que el desconocido llegara a la casa del guarda. Cuando la señorita Garth se dio la vuelta, la saludó cortésmente quitándose el sombrero. ¿Qué aspecto tenía de cerca? Tenía el aspecto de un clérigo en apuros.

Su retrato, de los pies a la cabeza, comenzaba con un sombrero de copa rodeado por una ancha banda de luto de crespón arrugado. Bajo el sombrero había un rostro largo y enjuto de piel cetrina, picado de viruelas y caracterizado del modo más extraordinario por unos ojos de diferente color, uno verde bilioso y el otro marrón bilioso, ambos de una penetrante inteligencia. Sus cabellos eran de un gris acerado, cuidadosamente cepillados hacia atrás en las sienes. Su mentón y sus mejillas mostraban el tono más azul de un buen afeitado; tenía una corta nariz romana; sus labios eran largos, delgados y flexibles, curvados hacia arriba en las comisuras en una sonrisa de sorna. Llevaba un alto corbatín blanco, rígido y sucio; el cuello de su levita, más alto, más rígido y más sucio, proyectaba sus puntas a ambos lado del mentón. Más abajo, la figura ágil y menuda del hombre estaba cubierta enteramente de sobrio y raído negro. La levita se ceñía a la cintura y se abría majestuosamente en el pecho. Sus manos estaban cubiertas por unos guantes de algodón de dedos pulcramente zurcidos; el paraguas, de cuya tela apenas quedaban unos milímetros alrededor de la contera, lo llevaba, no obstante, protegido por una funda de hule. De frente parecía más viejo; viéndolo cara a cara, su edad podía estimarse en cincuenta años o más. Caminando detrás de él, su espalda y sus hombros eran casi lo bastante jóvenes para que pasara por tener treinta y cinco. Sus modales se distinguían por una serenidad grave. Cuando abría la boca, hablaba con una sonora voz de bajo, de una fácil verborrea, y una atención estricta a la elección declamatoria de palabras con más de una sílaba. Sus labios levemente curvados destilaban persuasión y, andrajoso como iba, los brotes perennes de la cortesía florecían en todo él.

- ¿Estoy en lo cierto al pensar que ésta es la residencia del señor Vanstone? -empezó, señalando la casa con un gesto circular de la mano-. ¿Tengo el honor de dirigirme a un

miembro de la familia Vanstone?

- Sí -contestó la directa señorita Garth-. Se dirige usted a la institutriz del señor Vanstone.

El persuasivo caballero retrocedió un paso, admiró a la institutriz del señor Vanstone, avanzó de nuevo un paso y prosiguió la conversación.

- Y las dos señoritas -continuó-, las dos señoritas que paseaban con usted son sin duda las hijas del señor Vanstone, ¿me equivoco? He reconocido a la más morena, y la mayor a lo que creo, por el parecido con su bella madre. Supongo que la más joven...

- ¿Debo entender que conoce usted a la señora Vanstone? -dijo la señorita Garth, interrumpiendo el caudal de frases de aquel desconocido, que en su opinión y teniendo en cuenta las circunstancias, empezaba a desbordarse. El desconocido recibió la interrupción con una de sus corteses inclinaciones de cabeza y sumergió a la señorita Garth en su siguiente frase como si no hubiera ocurrido nada.

- Supongo que la más joven -continuó- se parece al padre. Le aseguro que su rostro me ha sorprendido. Observándolo con mi amistoso interés por la familia, me ha parecido realmente extraordinario. Encantador, característico, memorable, me he dicho a mí mismo. No se parece al de su hermana, ni al de su madre. ¿Es, pues, la imagen de su padre?

Una vez más, la señorita Garth intentó contener el flujo verbal de aquel hombre. Era evidente que no conocía al señor Vanstone, ni siquiera de vista, de lo contrario, jamás habría cometido el error de suponer que Magdalen se parecía a su padre. ¿Conocía mejor a la señora Vanstone? No había contestado a su pregunta en ese sentido. En nombre de todo lo extraño, ¿quién era? ¡Fuerzas de la desvergüenza!, ¿qué quería?

- Puede que sea usted un amigo de la familia, aunque yo no le recuerdo -dijo la señorita Garth-. ¿Qué le ha traído hasta aquí?, si me hace el favor. ¿Ha venido a visitar a la señora Vanstone?

- Esperaba ciertamente tener el placer de comunicarme con la señora Vanstone -respondió aquel hombre inveteradamente evasivo y cortés-. ¿Cómo está?

- Como de costumbre -dijo la señorita Garth, que notaba que sus reservas de cortesía se estaban agotando.

- ¿Se halla en casa?

- No.

- ¿Estará fuera mucho tiempo?

- Se ha ido a Londres con el señor Vanstone.

La larga cara del hombre se hizo más larga de repente. Su ojo marrón bilioso la miraba con desconcierto y el ojo verde bilioso siguió su ejemplo. Sus maneras delataron la impaciencia de forma manifiesta y eligió sus palabras con mayor cuidado aún.

- ¿Es probable que la ausencia de la señora Vanstone se extienda a un prolongado intervalo de tiempo? -inquirió.

- Se extenderá a tres semanas -respondió la señorita Garth-. Creo que ya me ha hecho suficientes preguntas -prosiguió, dejándose llevar por la cólera-. Le ruego que tenga la amabilidad de decirme su nombre y el asunto que le trae. Si quiere dejar algún mensaje para la señora Vanstone, yo voy a mandarle una carta en el correo de esta noche y podría transmitírselo.

- ¡Mil gracias! Una sugerencia muy valiosa. Permítame que la aproveche inmediatamente.

No se hallaba afectado en lo más mínimo por la expresión severa de la señorita Garth ni por sus graves palabras; sencillamente le había aliviado su propuesta y lo demostró con una sinceridad absolutamente seductora. Esta vez fue su ojo verde bilioso el que tomó la iniciativa y dio ejemplo de cómo recobrar la serenidad al ojo marrón bilioso. Sus labios volvieron a curvarse hacia arriba en las comisuras; se metió el paraguas bajo el brazo rápidamente y sacó una cartera negra, grande y anticuada, del bolsillo del pecho de su levita. De la cartera sacó un lápiz y una tarjeta; vaciló y reflexionó unos instantes; escribió rápidamente en la tarjeta y depositó ésta en la mano de la señorita Garth con la diligencia más cortés.

- Me sentiré muy agradecido si me hace el honor de incluir esta tarjeta en su carta - dijo-. No es necesario que la moleste además con un mensaje. Mi nombre bastará para recordar un pequeño asunto familiar a la señora Vanstone que sin duda ha escapado a su memoria. Acepte mis más sinceras gracias. Hoy ha sido un día de agradables sorpresas para mí. Los alrededores me han parecido extraordinariamente bonitos; he visto a las dos encantadoras hijas de la señora Vanstone; he conocido a una honrada preceptora de la familia del señor Vanstone. Me congratulo. Pido disculpas por haber dispuesto de su valioso tiempo. Le suplico acepte de nuevo mi agradecimiento. Le deseo buenos días.

Alzó el sombrero de copa. Su ojo marrón brilló, su ojo verde brilló, sus labios curvados dibujaron una sonrisa meliflua. En seguida giró sobre sus talones. Mostró la juvenil espalda que tanto le favorecía y sus cortas y activas piernas lo llevaron con paso ligero en dirección a la aldea. Uno, dos, tres, y llegó a la curva del camino. Cuatro, cinco, seis, y había desaparecido.

La señorita Garth miró la tarjeta que tenía en la mano y volvió a alzar la vista con mudo asombro. El nombre y la dirección de aquel desconocido con aspecto de clérigo (ambos escritos a lápiz) eran los siguientes:

Capitán Wragge. Oficina de correos, Bristol.

CAPÍTULO III

Cuando regresó a la casa, la señorita Garth no hizo el menor esfuerzo por ocultar su desfavorable opinión sobre el desconocido vestido de negro, cuyo propósito era sin duda obtener ayuda pecuniaria de la señora Vanstone. Lo que parecía menos inteligible era la naturaleza de su reclamación, a menos que fuera la de un pariente pobre. ¿Había mencionado alguna vez la señora Vanstone, en presencia de sus hijas, el nombre del capitán Wragge? Ninguna de ellas recordaba haberlo oído antes. ¿Se había referido la señora Vanstone en alguna ocasión a algún familiar pobre que dependiera de ella? Al contrario, en los últimos años había expresado la duda de que le quedara algún pariente con vida. Sin embargo, el capitán Wragge había manifestado claramente que el nombre de su tarjeta traería «un asunto familiar» a la memoria de la señora Vanstone. ¿Qué significaba? ¿Que el desconocido mentía sin una razón manifiesta, o bien un segundo enigma relacionado con el misterioso viaje a Londres?

Todas las probabilidades parecían apuntar a una conexión oculta entre los «asuntos familiares» que tan súbitamente habían alejado a los señores Vanstone de su hogar y el «asunto familiar» asociado al nombre del capitán Wragge. Las dudas de la señorita Garth volvieron a aguijonear su curiosidad mientras sellaba su carta a la señora Vanstone con la tarjeta del capitán incluida.

La respuesta llegó a vuelta de correo.

Madrugadora como siempre entre las mujeres de la casa, la señorita Garth se hallaba en el comedor cuando le llevaron la carta. Un primer vistazo a su contenido la convenció de la necesidad de leerla en privado con mayor detenimiento, antes de que le formularan preguntas embarazosas. Dejó dicho a la criada que se encargara Norah de hacer el té esa mañana y subió de inmediato a la soledad y seguridad de su dormitorio.

La carta de la señora Vanstone era extensa. La primera parte se refería al capitán Wragge y ofrecía sin reservas las obligadas explicaciones sobre aquel hombre y los motivos que lo habían llevado hasta Combe-Raven.

Según se afirmaba en la carta, la madre de la señora Vanstone había estado casada dos veces. El primer marido era un tal doctor Wragge, un viudo con hijos pequeños, uno de los cuales era el capitán de aspecto tan poco militar cuya dirección se limitaba a la oficina de correos de Bristol. La señora Wragge no había tenido hijos de su primer marido y después se había casado con el padre de la señora Vanstone. De ese segundo matrimonio era la señora Vanstone el único descendiente. A ambos los había perdido cuando era aún joven y, en el transcurso de los años, todos los familiares de su madre (que eran entonces los parientes más cercanos que le quedaban) habían ido muriendo uno tras otro. En el momento en que esto escribía, no tenía un solo pariente vivo en el mundo, salvo quizá ciertos primos a los que nunca había visto y de cuya existencia, ni siquiera en aquel momento, tenía la certeza.

En tales circunstancias, ¿qué vínculo familiar tenía el capitán Wragge con la señora Vanstone?

Ninguno en absoluto. Como hijo del primer marido de su madre con su primera esposa, ni siquiera la cortesía mejor entendida podría haberlo incluido en época alguna en la lista de los parientes más lejanos de la señora Vanstone. Perfectamente consciente de ello (continuaba diciendo la carta), el capitán Wragge había insistido, sin embargo, en imponerse como una especie de pariente, y ella había tenido la debilidad de sancionar la intrusión, únicamente por miedo a que, en caso contrario, se presentara a sí mismo al señor Vanstone y se aprovechara sin vergüenza ninguna de su generosidad. Con el natural deseo de evitar que su marido fuera molestado, y seguramente engañado también, por una persona que reclamaba una relación de parentesco con ella, y pese a lo ridícula que resultara esta pretensión, hacía muchos años que había adoptado la práctica de asistir al capitán de su propio peculio, con la condición de que no se acercara jamás a su casa y de que no se tomara la libertad de recurrir al señor Vanstone

en modo alguno.

Tras admitir sin ambages la imprudencia de tal proceder, la señora Vanstone proseguía explicando que tal vez se había sentido inclinada a mantenerlo por haberse acostumbrado desde su juventud a ver al capitán viviendo a expensas de uno u otro miembro de la familia de su madre. Poseedor de talentos que pudieran haberlo distinguido en casi cualquier carrera que hubiera elegido, había sido, empero, una vergüenza para todos sus parientes desde sus años juveniles. Lo habían expulsado del regimiento de la milicia en el que en otro tiempo disfrutara de un destino. Había probado un empleo tras otro y había fracasado en todos de forma indigna para acabar viviendo de su ingenio en el sentido más bajo y ruin de la frase. Se había casado con una pobre mujer ignorante que había servido como moza de taberna y que había entrado inesperadamente en posesión de una pequeña suma de dinero. Esta pequeña herencia la había despilfarrado sin compasión hasta el último cuarto de penique. Hablando claro, era un sinvergüenza incorregible y acababa de añadir una más a la larga lista de sus fechorías infringiendo con total desfachatez las condiciones bajo las cuales le había asistido la señora Vanstone hasta entonces. Ésta había escrito de inmediato a la dirección indicada en la tarjeta en tales términos y con tal resolución que le impedirían, eso esperaba y creía ella, volver a aventurarse cerca de la casa nunca más. De este modo concluía la señora Vanstone la primera parte de su carta, referida exclusivamente al capitán Wragge.

Aunque su declaración, así presentada, implicaba una debilidad de carácter en la señora Vanstone que, tras muchos años de íntima comunicación, la señorita Garth jamás había detectado, aceptó la explicación como algo natural, recibiéndola de buen grado en tanto que podía comunicarse, en esencia y sin faltar al decoro, para aplacar la irritada curiosidad de las jóvenes. Por esta razón, sobre todo, leyó atentamente la primera parte de la carta con una agradable sensación de alivio. Muy diferente fue la impresión que experimentó cuando pasó a la segunda y cuando la hubo leído hasta el final.

La segunda parte de la carta estaba dedicada al asunto del viaje a Londres.

La señora Vanstone empezaba por referirse a la larga e íntima amistad que había existido entre la señorita Garth y ella. Sentía que en honor a esa amistad debía explicarle en confidencia el motivo que la había inducido a abandonar el hogar con su marido. La señorita Garth había tenido la delicadeza de no demostrarlo, pero lógicamente su sorpresa debía de haber sido grande, y aún lo era sin duda, por el misterio que había envuelto su partida, y era indudable que debía de haberse preguntado qué relación tenía la señora Vanstone con asuntos familiares que (en su posición independiente en lo que a parientes se refería) por fuerza habían de concernir sólo al señor Vanstone.

Sin mencionar esos asuntos, lo cual no era deseable ni necesario, la señora Vanstone procedía a decir que despejaría todas las dudas de la señorita Garth de inmediato, en lo que a ella atañía, con una sencilla declaración. Había acompañado a su marido a Londres con el propósito de visitar a cierto médico de gran prestigio, a fin de consultarle un asunto muy delicado y angustioso relacionado con el estado de su salud. Más claro aún: el motivo de su angustia era ni más ni menos la posibilidad de volver a ser madre.

Cuando se le había planteado la duda por primera vez, la señora Vanstone la había considerado un mero error. El largo intervalo de tiempo transcurrido desde el nacimiento de su último hijo, la grave enfermedad padecida tras la muerte de ese niño en la infancia, su edad, todo la indujo a desechar la idea tan pronto como acudió a su cabeza. Pero la idea volvía una y otra vez a su pesar. Había sentido entonces la necesidad de consultar a la más alta autoridad médica y, al mismo tiempo, había temido que sus hijas se alarmaran si llamaba a un médico de Londres a su casa. Esa opinión médica había sido obtenida en las circunstancias antes mencionadas. Su duda se había convertido en certeza, y el resultado, que se produciría hacia el final del verano, era, a su edad y con las peculiaridades de su constitución, una fuente de gran inquietud futura, por no decir otra cosa. El médico había hecho lo posible por animarla, pero ella había comprendido el significado de sus preguntas mejor de lo que él suponía y sabía

que veía el futuro con serias dudas.

Tras haber revelado estos detalles, la señora Vanstone requería de la señorita Garth que los mantuviera en secreto. No había querido comentar con ella sus sospechas hasta que se confirmaran y ahora sentía una reticencia aún mayor a permitir que sus hijas se alarmaran en modo alguno por su causa. Lo mejor sería olvidar el asunto por el momento y aguardar con esperanza a que llegara el verano. Mientras tanto, confiaba en que se reunirían todos felizmente el veintitrés del mes corriente, día que el señor Vanstone había fijado para su regreso. Con esta indicación y los mensajes acostumbrados, la carta llegaba a su fin de manera brusca y confusa.

En los primeros minutos, una simpatía natural hacia la señora Vanstone fue el único sentimiento del que fue consciente la señorita Garth después de haber leído la carta. Al poco, sin embargo, en su pensamiento creció una sombra de duda que la dejó perpleja y consternada. ¿Era realmente la explicación que acababa de leer tan satisfactoria y completa como pretendía ser? Contrastándola con los hechos, desde luego que no.

Indiscutiblemente, la mañana de su partida, la señora Vanstone había abandonado la casa muy animada. A su edad y con su estado de salud, ¿era compatible aquel estado de ánimo con la visita al médico que pensaba hacer? Además, ¿no tenía nada que ver aquella carta de Nueva Orleáns que había hecho necesario el viaje del señor Vanstone con la partida de la esposa? ¿Por qué, si no, había alzado la vista con tal vehemencia al oír el comentario de su hija sobre el matasellos? Admitiendo el motivo alegado para su viaje, ¿acaso la actitud de la señora Vanstone la mañana en que se abrió aquella carta, y de nuevo la mañana de la partida, no sugería la existencia de algún otro motivo que su carta seguía ocultando?

Si así era, la conclusión que se derivaba resultaba muy dolorosa. Sintiéndose obligada por la larga amistad que la unía a la señorita Garth, la señora Vanstone le había otorgado en apariencia su máxima confianza sobre un tema para así mantener la más estricta reserva sobre otro sin que ella sospechara. De talante franco y abierto por naturaleza en sus propios asuntos, la señorita Garth evitó llevar claramente sus dudas hasta ese punto; el mero hecho de que se le hubiera ocurrido parecía implicar una falta de lealtad hacia una estimada amiga digna de confianza.

Guardó bajo llave la carta en su escritorio, se levantó con decisión para atender los efímeros intereses del día y bajó de nuevo al comedor. Entre múltiples incertidumbres, al menos tenía una cosa clara: los señores Vanstone volvían el veintitrés del mes corriente. ¿Quién podía decir que su regreso no aportaría nuevas revelaciones?

CAPÍTULO IV

Su regreso no aportó nuevas revelaciones; ninguna expectativa asociada a su vuelta se vio cumplida. Sobre el tema prohibido del motivo de su visita a Londres no cedieron ni el señor ni la señora de la casa. Fuera cual fuese su propósito, lo habían llevado a cabo con éxito según todos los indicios, pues ambos regresaron en perfecta posesión de su aspecto y actitud cotidianos. La animación de la señora Vanstone había descendido hasta su tranquilo nivel natural; el señor Vanstone había recuperado su imperturbable campechanía, tan espontánea e indolente como siempre. Éste era el resultado visible de su viaje, éste y ninguno más. ¿Había seguido ya su curso la revolución familiar? ¿Se hallaba el secreto, pues, oculto de manera impenetrable, oculto para siempre?

Nada en este mundo permanece oculto para siempre. El oro que yace ignorado durante siglos bajo tierra aparece un día en la superficie. La arena se vuelve traidora y delata la huella que la ha pisado; el agua devuelve a la superficie reveladora el cuerpo que ha sido sumergido. El fuego mismo deja escrita la confesión en las cenizas de la sustancia que consumió. El odio fuerza el secreto de su prisión en los pensamientos a través de la puerta de los ojos, y el amor encuentra al Judas que lo traiciona con un beso. Allá donde posemos nuestra mirada, la inevitable ley de la revelación es una de las leyes de la Naturaleza: el secreto duradero es un milagro que aún está por ver.

¿De qué forma estaba destinado el secreto todavía oculto a revelarse por sí mismo en Combe-Raven? ¿De qué suceso venidero en las vidas cotidianas del padre, la madre y las hijas iba a valerse la ley de la revelación para iniciar el camino fatídico hacia el descubrimiento? El camino se abrió (invisible para los padres e insospechado para las hijas) a causa del primer acontecimiento acaecido tras el regreso de los señores Vanstone, un acontecimiento que, en su superficie, no presentaba mayor trascendencia que la trivial ceremonia social de una visita matutina.

Tres días después de que el señor y la señora de Combe-Raven hubieran vuelto, los miembros femeninos de la familia se hallaban casualmente reunidos en la salita. Las ventanas daban al jardín y la arboleda, esta última protegida del exterior por una cerca; allí se abría un portillo al que se accedía desde el exterior por un camino. Durante una pausa en la conversación, la atención de las señoras se vio súbitamente atraída hacia ese portillo debido al brusco sonido del pestillo de hierro encajando en su cerradero. Alguien había llegado por el camino y se había adentrado en la finca. Magdalen acudió al punto a la ventana para ser la primera en ver al visitante a través de los árboles.

Al cabo de unos minutos se hizo visible la figura de un caballero en el punto en que la senda de la arboleda se cruzaba con el sinuoso sendero del jardín que conducía a la casa. Magdalen lo observó con atención; en un principio no pareció reconocerlo. Cuando el caballero se acercó, sin embargo, Magdalen dio un respingo, asombrada, y, volviéndose rápidamente hacia su madre y hermana, declaró que el caballero del jardín no era otro que el «señor Francis Clare».

El visitante así anunciado era el hijo del más antiguo amigo del señor Vanstone y su vecino más próximo.

El señor Clare padre habitaba en una pequeña casa de campo sin pretensiones situada justamente al otro lado de la cerca de seto vivo que marcaba los límites de la finca de Combe-Raven. Como miembro de la rama más joven de una familia de antiquísimo raigambre, la única herencia de cierta importancia que había recibido de sus antepasados era la posesión de una magnífica biblioteca, que no sólo llenaba las habitaciones de su modesta morada, sino también las escaleras y los pasillos. Los libros del señor Clare eran el mayor objeto de interés en su vida. Hacía muchos años que se había quedado viudo y no ocultaba su filosófica resignación por la pérdida de su esposa. Como padre, consideraba que sus tres hijos eran un mal doméstico necesario que amenazaba de continuo la santidad de su estudio y la seguridad de sus libros. Cuando

los chicos se fueron al colegio, el señor Clare les dijo «adiós» y pensó «gracias a Dios» para sus adentros. En cuanto a sus reducidos ingresos y su aún más reducido servicio doméstico, contemplaba ambas cosas desde el mismo punto de vista satíricamente indiferente. Se daba a sí mismo el nombre de mendigo con alcurnia. Abandonó enteramente la dirección de su casa en las manos de la anciana desaseada que era su única sirviente, con la condición de que, en todo el año, jamás se acercara a sus libros con un plumero en ellas. Sus poetas favoritos eran Horacio y Pope; sus filósofos predilectos, Hobbes y Voltaire. Hacía ejercicio y tomaba el aire fresco a regañadientes, y siempre caminaba la misma distancia sin excepción, por la carretera más horrorosa del contorno. Encorvado de espaldas y de genio vivo, era capaz de digerir los rábanos y de dormir después de tomar té verde. Sus opiniones sobre la naturaleza humana eran las de Diógenes, atemperadas por las de Rochefoucault. Sus hábitos privados eran muy descuidados y gustaba de alardear sobre todo de que había sobrevivido a todos los prejuicios humanos.

Tal era aquel hombre singular en sus aspectos más externos. Nadie había descubierto hasta entonces las cualidades más nobles que pudiera poseer bajo la superficie. Cierto es que el señor Vanstone mantenía con firmeza que «el lado peor del señor Clare era su lado externo», pero era el único en expresar tal opinión entre sus vecinos. La relación entre estos dos hombres tan dispares duraba desde hacía años y era casi lo bastante íntima para llamarse amistad. Habían adquirido la costumbre de reunirse para fumar ciertas veladas durante la semana en el estudio del cínico filósofo y de discutir allí sobre cualquier tema imaginable: el señor Vanstone como firme portador de la antorcha de la afirmación, respondiendo el señor Clare con las afiladas armas de los sofismas. Por lo general se peleaban de noche y se encontraban en el terreno neutral de la arboleda para reconciliarse a la mañana siguiente. El vínculo establecido de tan curiosa manera se veía reforzado por un interés sincero del señor Vanstone por los tres hijos de su vecino, interés cuyos beneficios eran tanto más importantes para ellos, dado que uno de los prejuicios a los que su padre había sobrevivido era el prejuicio en favor de los propios hijos.

- Observo a esos chicos -solía decir el filósofo- con total imparcialidad; excluyo de toda consideración el insignificante accidente de su nacimiento y los encuentro por debajo de la media en todos los aspectos. La única excusa que tiene un caballero pobre para atreverse a existir en el siglo diecinueve es la excusa de una extraordinaria habilidad. Mis chicos han tenido poco seso desde la infancia. Si dispusiera de capital para colocarlos, haría de Frank un carnicero, de Cecil un panadero y de Arthur un tendero, puesto que son las únicas vocaciones humanas de las que sé que habrá siempre demanda. Tal y como están las cosas, no tengo dinero con que ayudarlos y ellos no tienen cerebro para ayudarse a sí mismos. A mí me parecen tres seres humanos superfluos con chaquetas sucias y botas ruidosas, y a menos que se aparten de la comunidad dándose a la fuga, no puedo decir que sepa qué hacer con ellos.

Por fortuna para los chicos, las opiniones del señor Vanstone estaban aún firmemente aprisionadas por los prejuicios al uso. Por intercesión suya y gracias a su influencia, Frank, Cecil y Arthur ingresaron en una prestigiosa escuela de segunda enseñanza. Durante las vacaciones, gracias a Dios, se les permitía utilizar el potrero del señor Vanstone, y dentro de la casa, la relación con la señora Vanstone y sus hijas sirvió para humanizarlos y mejorar sus modales. En tales ocasiones, el señor Clare se acercaba a veces desde su casa (en batín y zapatillas) y contemplaba a los chicos, con aire desesperanzado por la ventana o por encima de la cerca, como si fueran tres animales salvajes a los que su vecino intentara domesticar.

- Usted y su esposa son excelentes personas -solía decirle al señor Vanstone-. Respeto con todo mi corazón sus honorables prejuicios en favor de esos chicos míos, pero están ustedes tan equivocados, ¡tan rotundamente equivocados! No es mi intención ofenderle, le hablo con total imparcialidad, pero fíjese en lo que le digo, Vanstone, los tres acabarán mal, pese a todo cuanto usted haga por evitarlo.

Años después, cuando Frank había alcanzado la edad de diecisiete años, se produjo el más absurdo de los ejemplos sobre este curioso cambio en la relativa posición de padre y amigo, respectivamente, que ocupaban ambos vecinos. Un ingeniero civil del norte de

Inglaterra que debía ciertos favores al señor Vanstone expresó su disposición a tomar a Frank bajo su supervisión en unas condiciones sumamente favorables. Cuando recibió esta propuesta, el señor Clare echó primero, como de costumbre, su papel de padre de Frank sobre los hombros del señor Vanstone y luego aplacó el entusiasmo paternal de su vecino desde el punto de vista de un espectador imparcial.

- Es la mejor oportunidad que podía presentársele -exclamó el señor Vanstone en un arrebato de entusiasmo paterno.

- Mi buen amigo, no la aprovechará -replicó el señor Clare con el frío aplomo de un amigo indiferente.

- Pues claro que la aprovechará -insistió el señor Vanstone.

- Usted supone que Frank tiene una mente matemática -prosiguió el señor Clare-, que es aplicado y que posee ambición y firmeza de carácter. ¡Bah! ¡Bah! No lo ve usted con imparcialidad como yo. Yo le digo que ni matemáticas, ni aplicación, ni firmeza de carácter. Frank es un compendio de negaciones, y ahí están.

- ¡A la porra con sus negaciones! -gritó el señor Vanstone-. Me importan un rábano las negaciones, y las afirmaciones también. Frank dispone de una espléndida oportunidad y aceptaré cualquier apuesta que tenga usted a bien hacer porque sabrá aprovecharla.

- No soy lo bastante rico como para tener la costumbre de apostar -dijo el señor Clare-, pero creo que tengo una guinea en algún lugar de la casa, y le apuesto esa guinea a que Frank vuelve a nuestras manos como un chelín falso.

- ¡Hecho! -dijo el señor Vanstone-. ¡No, espere un momento! No pienso cometer la injusticia de respaldar el carácter del muchacho cubriendo la apuesta. ¡Le apuesto cinco contra uno a que Frank tendrá éxito en este asunto! Debería usted avergonzarse de hablar de él como lo hace. No sé cuál es su truco, pero siempre termina consiguiendo que me ponga de parte del chico, como si fuera yo su padre en lugar de usted. ¡Ah, sí! Si le dejo, querrá defenderse. No voy a dejarle; no quiero escuchar uno de sus peculiares alegatos. Según usted, el negro es blanco. No me importa, es negro a pesar de todo. Ya puede hablar por los codos, yo pienso escribir a mi amigo y decirle que sí, en beneficio de Frank, con el correo de hoy.

Tales fueron las circunstancias que ocasionaron la partida del señor Francis Clare al norte de Inglaterra a la edad de diecisiete años, para empezar una nueva vida como ingeniero civil.

De vez en cuando, el amigo del señor Vanstone le comunicaba a éste noticias sobre su nuevo pupilo. Alababa a Frank como un muchacho tranquilo, caballeroso e interesante, pero también decía que era bastante lento en adquirir los rudimentos de la ciencia de la ingeniería. Otras cartas posteriores indicaban que mostraba una excesiva propensión a desanimarse, que había sido enviado, por ese motivo, a una nueva obra ferroviaria por ver si el cambio de escenario lo espabilaba, y que había salido beneficiado por el experimento en todos los aspectos, salvo quizá en lo que concernía a sus estudios profesionales, que seguían avanzando, pero con lentitud. Comunicaciones subsiguientes anunciaron su partida hacia Bélgica, al cuidado de un capataz de confianza, para realizar ciertas obras públicas; mencionaban los beneficios generales que parecían derivarse del nuevo cambio; alababan su excelente educación y sus modales, que eran de gran ayuda para facilitar la comunicación comercial con extranjeros, y pasaba por alto, en ominoso silencio, la cuestión principal de sus progresos reales en la adquisición de conocimientos. El amigo de Frank presentó concienzudamente todos estos informes, y muchos otros similares, a la atención del padre de Frank. En cada una de tales ocasiones, el señor Clare celebraba su triunfo sobre el señor Vanstone y el señor Vanstone se peleaba con el señor Clare.

- Uno de estos días, deseará usted no haber hecho esa apuesta -decía el cínico filósofo.

- Uno de estos días, tendré la bendita satisfacción de embolsarme su guinea -exclamaba su optimista amigo.

Dos años habían transcurrido entonces desde la marcha de Frank. Al cabo de otro año, los resultados hablaron por sí mismos y pusieron fin a la disputa.

Dos días después de su regreso de Londres, el señor Vanstone tuvo que ausentarse de la mesa del desayuno antes de tener tiempo de echar un vistazo a las cartas que le habían llegado con el correo de la mañana. Se las metió en uno de los bolsillos de su chaqueta de caza y volvió a sacarlas en un puñado para leerlas cuando tuvo ocasión más tarde. El puñado incluía toda la correspondencia con una excepción; esa excepción era un informe final del ingeniero civil, por el que le notificaba el final de la relación entre su pupilo y él, y el regreso inmediato de Frank a la casa paterna.

Mientras este importante anuncio yacía insospechado en el bolsillo del señor Vanstone, el objeto del mismo viajaba de vuelta al hogar con la velocidad de que era capaz el ferrocarril. A las diez y media de la noche, el señor Clare estaba sentado en la soledad de su estudio con sus libros, su té verde y su gato negro favorito haciéndole compañía, cuando oyó ruido de pisadas en el pasillo; la puerta se abrió, y Frank apareció ante él.

Un hombre normal se hubiera sorprendido, pero el aplomo del filósofo no iba a alterarse por una nimiedad tal como el regreso inesperado de su primogénito. No hubiera alzado la vista con más calma de su erudito volumen de haber estado ausente su hijo tres minutos en lugar de tres años.

- Exactamente lo que yo había pronosticado -dijo el señor Clare-. No me interrumpas con explicaciones y no asustes al gato. Mira si hay algo de comer en la cocina y luego acuéstate. Puedes ir a Combe-Raven mañana y darle este mensaje al señor Vanstone de mi parte: «Saludos de mi padre, señor, y he vuelto a sus manos como un chelín falso, como él siempre afirmó que ocurriría. Se guarda su guinea y se lleva las cinco de usted, y espera que la próxima vez prestará más atención a lo que él diga». Ése es el mensaje. Cierra la puerta cuando salgas. Buenas noches.

Bajo tan desfavorables auspicios hizo su aparición el señor Francis Clare a la mañana siguiente en los jardines de Combe-Raven y, dudando de la recepción que le aguardaba, se acercó lentamente a la casa.

No fue de extrañar que Magdalen no lo reconociera a simple vista. Frank había partido siendo un torpe muchacho de diecisiete años y volvía como un joven de veinte. Su esbelta figura había adquirido fuerza y gracia, y había crecido hasta alcanzar una estatura media. Sus facciones pequeñas y regulares, que supuestamente había heredado de su madre, se habían llenado y redondeado sin perder su extraordinaria delicadeza de formas. Su barba se hallaba aún en la infancia y las incipientes líneas de sus patillas trazaban apenas un modesto camino por las mejillas. Sus ojos castaños, afables e inquietos, hubieran favorecido más a un rostro de mujer; les faltaba carácter y firmeza para encajar en la cara de un hombre. Sus manos tenían la misma costumbre inquieta que sus ojos; constantemente cambiaban de posición, constantemente se retorcían y daban vueltas a cualquier objeto perdido del que pudieran apoderarse. Sin duda alguna Frank era apuesto, elegante, bien educado, pero no había observador atento que pudiera mirarlo sin sospechar que la antigua y robusta estirpe familiar había empezado a debilitarse en las últimas generaciones y que el señor Francis Clare tenía más de la sombra de sus antepasados que de la sustancia.

Cuando se desvaneció en parte el asombro causado por su aparición, se inició la búsqueda del informe perdido. Se halló en el más recóndito hueco del holgado bolsillo del señor Vanstone, y dicho caballero lo leyó en el acto.

Los hechos puros y simples, tal como los presentaba el ingeniero, eran en resumen los siguientes. Frank no poseía la capacidad necesaria para la profesión y era inútil perder el tiempo manteniéndolo en un empleo para el que carecía de vocación. Con este convencimiento por ambas partes después de tres años de prueba, el maestro había considerado que el camino más honrado para su pupilo era volver a casa y presentar sus resultados con toda sinceridad ante su padre y sus amigos. En otra profesión para la que estuviera más capacitado y por la que sintiera algún interés, sin duda desplegaría el trabajo y la perseverancia que se había sentido demasiado desalentado para practicar

en la profesión ahora abandonada. Personalmente, era estimado por todos cuantos le conocían, y los múltiples amigos que había dejado en el norte le deseaban de todo corazón una futura prosperidad. Tal era la esencia del informe y así concluía.

Muchos hombres hubieran considerado que el ingeniero expresaba sus opiniones con excesiva diplomacia y, sospechando que intentaba presentar bajo la luz más favorable un caso perdido, hubieran albergado serias dudas en cuanto al futuro de Frank. El señor Vanstone era demasiado bondadoso y optimista -y también estaba demasiado inquieto por no ceder ante su viejo antagonista ni un centímetro más de lo necesario- para contemplar la carta desde tan desfavorable punto de vista. ¿Era culpa de Frank que no tuviera talento natural para ser ingeniero? ¿Acaso no habla tenido ningún otro joven un mal comienzo en la vida? Muchos empezaban así y lo superaban, y luego conseguían maravillas. Mientras hacía estos comentarios sobre la carta, el bondadoso caballero palmeaba a Frank en el hombro.

- ¡Anímate, muchacho! -dijo el señor Vanstone-. Un día de éstos saldaremos cuentas con tu padre, ¡aunque esta vez ha ganado la apuesta!

El ejemplo que así daba el señor de la casa fue seguido al punto por la familia, con la única excepción de Norah, cuya formalidad y reserva incurables se manifestaron de manera muy poco cortés en su distante actitud hacia el visitante. El resto, guiado por Magdalen (que había sido la compañera de juegos favorita de Frank en tiempos pretéritos) adoptó con él sin esfuerzo la misma familiaridad de siempre. Era «Frank» para todos salvo para Norah, que insistía en llamarle «señor Clare». Ni siquiera cuando comentó el recibimiento que le había dispensado su padre la noche anterior, animado por los demás, consiguió alterar la gravedad de Norah. Ésta permaneció sentada con el rostro vuelto, los ojos bajos y el vivo tono de sus mejillas más cálido y encendido de lo habitual. Los otros, incluida la señorita Garth, hallaron absolutamente irresistible el discurso de bienvenida del viejo señor Clare a su hijo. El jolgorio había alcanzado su punto álgido cuando el criado entró y dejó muda a la concurrencia anunciando el nombre de las visitas que aguardaban en el salón.

- El señor Marrable, la señora Marrable y la señorita Marrable; Evergreen Lodge, Clifton.

Norah se levantó con presteza, como si los recién llegados fueran un alivio para su espíritu. La señora Vanstone fue la siguiente en abandonar su silla. Ambas salieron primero para recibir a las visitas. Magdalen, que prefería la compañía de su padre y de Frank, rogó con insistencia que le permitieran quedarse, pero, tras concederle cinco minutos de gracia, la señorita Garth la tomó por su cuenta y la hizo salir de la habitación. Frank se levantó para despedirse.

- No, no -dijo el señor Vanstone, deteniéndole-. No te vayas. Esa gente no se quedará mucho tiempo. El señor Marrable es un comerciante de Bristol. Lo he visto una o dos veces, cuando las chicas me obligaron a llevarlas a fiestas en Clifton. Son meros conocidos, nada más. Ven a fumarte un cigarro en el invernadero. ¡A la porra con las visitas! No hacen más que molestar. Me presentaré en el último momento con una disculpa y tú me seguirás a una distancia prudente como prueba de que estaba realmente ocupado.

Tras proponer esta ingeniosa estratagema en un susurro confidencial, el señor Vanstone cogió a Frank por el brazo y lo condujo a la parte posterior de la casa. Los primeros diez minutos de aislamiento en el invernadero transcurrieron sin incidentes de ningún tipo. Al cabo de ese tiempo, una veloz figura vestida con brillantes colores apareció ante los ojos de los dos caballeros como un relámpago al otro lado del cristal, la puerta se abrió de golpe, cayeron unos tiestos de flores en homenaje a las enaguas que los rozaban al pasar, y la hija menor del señor Vanstone corrió hacia él impetuosamente con toda la apariencia de haber perdido el seso de forma repentina.

- ¡Papá!, el sueño de toda mi vida se ha realizado -exclamó, tan pronto como pudo hablar-. Saldré volando a través del tejado del invernadero si alguien no me sujeta. Los Marrable han venido con una invitación. Adivina, papaíto, ¡adivina lo que van a hacer en

Evergreen Lodge!

- Un baile -dijo el señor Vanstone sin vacilar.

- ¡Una función de teatro! -profirió Magdalen, y su clara voz juvenil resonó en el invernadero como una campana; las holgadas mangas de su vestido cayeron hacia atrás, dejando al descubierto sus redondeados brazos blancos hasta los codos con hoyuelos, cuando Magdalen dio una palmada al aire, extasiada-. *Los rivales* es la obra, papá, *Los rivales* del famoso como se llame, ¡y quieren que yo actúe en ella! Lo que más deseaba en todo el universo. Todo depende de ti. Mamá menea la cabeza, y la señorita Garth me lanza miradas fulminantes, y Norah pone mala cara como siempre, pero si tú dices que sí, las tres tendrán que ceder y dejarme hacer mi voluntad. Di que sí -rogó, arrimándose con mimo a su padre y apretando sus labios con cariñosa suavidad en la oreja de su progenitor para susurrar las palabras siguientes-. Di que sí, y seré una buena chica el resto de mi vida.

- ¿Una buena chica? -repitió el señor Vanstone-. Supongo que quieres decir una alocada. ¡A la porra con esa gente y sus funciones de teatro! Tendré que volver a entrar y ver de qué se trata. No es necesario que tires el cigarro, Frank. Este asunto no te concierne y puedes quedarte aquí.

- No, no puede -dijo Magdalen-. Él también está metido en este asunto.

Hasta ese momento, el señor Francis Clare había permanecido en un modesto segundo término, del que surgió entonces con expresión de mudo asombro.

- Sí -continuó Magdalen, respondiendo a su mirada interrogativa con perfecto aplomo-. Vas a actuar. La señorita Marrable y yo tenemos talento para la organización y lo hemos arreglado todo en cinco minutos. Quedaban dos papeles en la obra por asignar. Uno era el de Lucy, la doncella, que será mi personaje, con el permiso de papá -añadió, pellizcando maliciosamente a su padre en el brazo-, y no va a decir que no, ¿verdad? Primero, porque es un amor; segundo, porque yo le quiero y él me quiere; en tercer lugar, porque nunca hay diferencia de opiniones entre nosotros dos (¿no es cierto?); en cuarto lugar, porque le doy un beso, lo que naturalmente le cierra la boca y resuelve la cuestión. Dios mío, me estoy enredando. ¿Por dónde iba? ¡Ah, sí!, explicaba a Frank…

- Discúlpame -empezó Frank, intentando en este punto intercalar su protesta.

- El segundo personaje de la obra -prosiguió Magdalen sin prestarle la menor atención- es Falkland, un amante celoso, con una fácil verborrea. La señorita Marrable y yo hemos charlado sobre Falkland en privado en el asiento junto a la ventana mientras los demás hablaban. Es una joven deliciosa, tan impulsiva, tan sensible, tan carente por completo de afectación. Se ha confiado a mí. Me ha dicho: «Una de nuestras tragedias es que no conseguimos encontrar a un caballero que quiera luchar con las espantosas dificultades de Falkland». Por supuesto yo la he tranquilizado. Por supuesto le he dicho: «Yo conozco al caballero, y él querrá luchar inmediatamente». «¡Oh, cielos!, ¿quién es?» «El señor Francis Clare.» «¿Y dónde se halla?» «Aquí mismo en este momento.» «¿Sería usted tan encantadora, señorita Vanstone, de ir a buscarlo?» «Iré a buscarlo, señorita Marrable, con el mayor placer.» He abandonado el asiento de la ventana, he ido corriendo a la salita, he olido el humo de los cigarros, he seguido el olor y aquí estoy.

- Sé que es un cumplido que me pidan que actúe -dijo Frank, muy turbado-. Pero espero que la señorita Marrable y tú me excusaréis…

- Por supuesto que no. Tanto la señorita Marrable como yo nos distinguimos por la firmeza de nuestro carácter. Cuando afirmamos categóricamente que el señor Mengano va a hacer el papel de Falkland, lo decimos realmente en serio. Ven dentro, que te presentaré.

- Pero yo no he actuado nunca. No sé cómo se hace.

- No tiene la más mínima importancia. Si no sabes cómo, pregúntame a mí y yo te enseñaré.

- ¿Tú? -exclamó el señor Vanstone-. ¿Qué sabes tú de eso?

- ¡Papá, por favor, sé serio! Tengo la firme convicción de que podría interpretar cualquier papel de la obra, incluido el de Falkland. No me hagas repetírtelo, Frank. Ven dentro para que te presente.

Magdalen se cogió del brazo de su padre y se dirigió con él a la puerta del invernadero. Al llegar a los escalones, se dio la vuelta y miró hacia atrás para ver si Frank la seguía. Fue un movimiento breve, pero en ese momento la natural firmeza de su voluntad hizo acopio de todos sus recursos, se reafirmó con la influencia de su belleza, ordenó, y conquistó. Estaba encantadora: sus mejillas tenían un suave arrebol; el placer radiante brillaba y centelleaba en sus ojos; la posición de su figura, súbitamente vuelta de cintura para arriba, delataba su delicada fuerza, su ágil firmeza, su gracia serpentina y seductora.

- ¡Ven! -dijo, con un coqueto movimiento de la cabeza-. ¡Ven, Frank!

Pocos hombres de cuarenta años se hubieran resistido en aquel momento. Frank sólo había cumplido los veinte. En otras palabras, arrojó al suelo el cigarro y salió del invernadero en pos de Magdalen.

Cuando se dio la vuelta para cerrar la puerta -en el instante en que dejó de verla-, se reavivó su reticencia a verse relacionado con la función teatral privada. Se detuvo de nuevo al pie de las escaleras de la casa, arrancó una ramita de una planta cercana, la rompió con la mano y miró en derredor con gesto nervioso, hacia un lado y también hacia el otro. El sendero de la izquierda conducía a la casa de su padre, tenía franca la huida. ¿Por qué no aprovecharse?

Mientras él seguía dudando, el señor Vanstone y su hija habían alcanzado el final de las escaleras. Una vez más, Magdalen se dio la vuelta para mirar, para mirar con su irresistible belleza, con su sonrisa arrolladora. Volvió a hacer un gesto con la cabeza, y de nuevo él la siguió escaleras arriba y luego traspasó el umbral. La puerta se cerró tras ellos.

Así, con un insignificante gesto de invitación por un lado, con un insignificante acto de obediencia por el otro; así, sin conocimiento por parte de él ni pensamiento por parte de ella sobre el secreto que aún guardaba el viaje a Londres, tomaron el camino que conducía al descubrimiento de ese secreto, a través de numerosos vericuetos más tenebrosos que aún estaban por llegar.

CAPÍTULO V

Las preguntas del señor Vanstone sobre el espectáculo teatral propuesto en Evergreen Lodge hallaron respuesta en el relato de una serie de verdaderos desastres, en los cuales la señorita Marrable personificaba la causa inocente y sus padres representaban el papel de víctimas principales.

La señorita Marrable era el más despiadado de los tiranos: una hija única. Jamás había otorgado un privilegio constitucional a sus oprimidos padres desde la época en que le salió el primer diente. Pronto iba a cumplir los diecisiete años, había decidido celebrarlo con la representación de una obra teatral, había dado las órdenes oportunas y sus dóciles padres las habían acatado incondicionalmente, como de costumbre. La señora Marrable cedió su salón para que fuera arrasado y convertido en escenario y teatro. El señor Marrable se hizo con los servicios de un respetable profesional para que instruyera a las señoritas y los caballeros, y para que aceptara las responsabilidades inherentes a la creación de un mundo teatral a partir de un caos doméstico. Tras haberse acostumbrado a que rompieran muebles y mancharan paredes, a golpes, caídas, martilleos y gritos, con continuos portazos y constantes carreras arriba y abajo, los señores nominales de la casa creían sinceramente que sus mayores preocupaciones habían concluido. ¡Inocente y fatal engaño! Una cosa es montar un escenario privado y elegir la obra, y otra muy distinta encontrar a los actores que la representen. Hasta el momento, en Evergreen Lodge sólo habían tenido ocasión de padecer las pequeñas molestias preliminares de rigor. Aún tenían que llegar los auténticos quebraderos de cabeza.

Habiendo elegido *Los rivales*, la señorita Marrable se apropió, de forma natural, del papel de Lydia Languish. Uno de sus galanes predilectos se reservó el papel del capitán Absolute y otro se apoderó violentamente del de sir Lucius O'Trigger. A estos dos les siguió una complaciente solterona de la familia, que aceptó la pesada carga dramática de la señora Malaprop, y ahí el proceso teatral llegó a una pausa. Quedaban nueve papeles hablados por asignar, y con esa ineludible necesidad, empezaron los verdaderos problemas.

De repente, todos los amigos de la familia demostraron su inconstancia por primera vez en la vida. Tras alentar la idea de la obra, rechazaron el sacrificio personal de actuar en ella, o aceptaron interpretar un personaje y abandonaron luego ante el esfuerzo de aprenderse el papel, o se ofrecieron para representar los personajes que ya sabían comprometidos y rehusaron los que estaban libres, o estaban aquejados de una débil constitución y se obstinaban en caer enfermos cuando los necesitaban en los ensayos, o tenían parientes puritanos a sus espaldas y, tras meterse en sus papeles alegremente al principio de la semana, se desprendían de ellos, arrepentidos, al final de ésta, bajo la fuerte presión familiar. Mientras tanto, los carpinteros martilleaban y se levantaban los decorados. La señorita Marrable, que era de un temperamento sensible, se puso histérica bajo la tensión de una perpetua ansiedad; el médico de la familia no quiso hacerse responsable de las consecuencias nerviosas si no se hacía algo. Se redoblaron los esfuerzos por doquier. Se buscaron actores y actrices con desesperada indiferencia hacia toda consideración sobre las aptitudes personales. La necesidad, que no conoce ley, ni en el teatro ni fuera de él, aceptó a un muchacho de dieciocho años para representar a sir Anthony Absolute; el regidor acordó proporcionar las arrugas necesarias gracias a los recursos inagotables del arte teatral. Una dama de edad desconocida y de aspecto corpulento -pero que tenía el corazón en su sitio- se ofreció para interpretar el papel de la sentimental Julia, aportando como recomendación dramática su costumbre de llevar peluca. Gracias a estas enérgicas medidas, la obra halló al fin sus intérpretes, exceptuando siempre los intratables personajes de Lucy, la doncella, y Falkland, el celoso amante de Julia. Acudían los caballeros, veían a Julia en los ensayos, observaban su corpulencia y la peluca, no se fijaban en dónde tenía el corazón, se arredraban ante las perspectivas, se disculpaban y se iban. Las señoras leían el papel de Lucy, notaban que aparecía en buena parte de la primera mitad de la obra y que se desvanecía completamente en la segunda parte, les molestaba

desaparecer de la atención del público de esa manera, cuando todos los demás gozaban de la oportunidad de destacar hasta el final, cerraban el libro, se disculpaban y se iban. Quedaban ocho días para la noche de la representación, se había convencido a una falange de mártires sociales en número de doscientos para que la presenciaran, era absolutamente necesario realizar tres ensayos generales, y aún faltaban intérpretes para dos papeles. Con esta lamentable historia y con humildísimas disculpas por abusar de una amistad superficial, los Marrable aparecieron en Combe-Raven para recurrir a las señoritas en busca de una Lucy, y al universo entero en busca de un Falkland, con la pertinacia mendicante de una familia desesperada.

La exposición de estas circunstancias, dirigida a un público que incluía a un padre del carácter del señor Vanstone y a una hija del temperamento de Magdalen, produjo el resultado que podía preverse desde el principio. Bien porque malinterpretara el ominoso silencio que guardaban su esposa y la señorita Garth, bien porque no le prestara atención, el señor Vanstone no sólo dio permiso a Magdalen para ayudar a la desesperada compañía teatral, sino que aceptó la invitación para presenciar la obra en su nombre y en el de Norah. La señora Vanstone rehusó acompañarlos a causa de su salud y la señorita Garth sólo se comprometió a formar parte del público con la condición de que no la necesitaran en casa. Se entregaron los papeles de Lucy y Falkland (que la angustiada familia llevaba consigo a todas partes, como enfermedades incidentales) a sus intérpretes en aquel mismo momento. Las débiles protestas de Frank fueron rechazadas sin ser oídas; los días y las horas de los ensayos fueron anotados cuidadosamente en las tapas de los libros, y los Marrable se despidieron con una explosión de gracias al unísono: padre, madre e hija sembraron expresiones de agradecimiento por doquier, desde la puerta del salón hasta la verja del jardín.

Tan pronto como desapareció el carruaje, Magdalen se presentó a la observación general bajo un aspecto enteramente nuevo.

- Si vienen más visitas hoy -dijo, con la mayor seriedad en la expresión y la actitud-, no estoy en casa. Éste es un asunto mucho más serio de lo que suponéis todos. Vete solo a algún lugar, Frank, y léete tu papel, y no dejes que tu atención se desvíe si puedes evitarlo. No estaré disponible hasta más tarde. Si vuelves, con permiso de papá, después de cenar, mis opiniones sobre el papel de Falkland estarán a tu disposición. ¡Thomas!, que el jardinero haga lo que quiera menos ruidos floriculturales bajo mi ventana. Voy a sumergirme en el estudio durante el resto de la tarde y cuanto más silenciosa esté la casa, más se lo agradeceré a todo el mundo.

Antes de que la batería de reproches de la señorita Garth pudiera abrir fuego, antes de que el primer estallido de carcajadas del señor Vanstone pudiera escapar de sus labios, Magdalen inclinó la cabeza con imperturbable gravedad, subió las escaleras de la casa caminando por primera vez en su vida en lugar de correr y se retiró en aquel mismo instante a su dormitorio. El asombro impotente de Frank ante su desaparición añadió un nuevo elemento de absurdo a la escena. Se apoyó primero en una pierna y luego en la otra, enrollando y desenrollando su parte y mirando con aire lastimero los rostros de sus amigos.

- Sé que no puedo hacerlo -dijo-. ¿Puedo venir después de cenar y escuchar las opiniones de Magdalen? Gracias. Vendré hacia las ocho. No le cuente nada a mi padre sobre esto, por favor; no me dejaría en paz. -Éstas fueron las únicas palabras que tuvo ánimos para pronunciar. Se alejó en dirección a la arboleda sin saber adonde iba, con el papel colgando abierto de la mano, el más inepto de los Falklands, el más desvalido de los seres humanos.

La marcha de Frank dejó a la familia a solas y fue la señal para un ataque contra la inveterada negligencia del señor Vanstone en el ejercicio de su autoridad paterna.

- ¿En qué estabas pensando, Andrew, al darle permiso? -dijo la señora Vanstone-. Creía que mi silencio sería advertencia más que suficiente para que dijeras que no.

- Una equivocación, señor Vanstone -interpuso la señorita Garth-, hecha con la mejor intención, pero equivocación al fin y al cabo.

- Puede que sea una equivocación -dijo Norah, poniéndose de parte de su padre, como de costumbre-. Pero de verdad que no veo cómo papá, ni ningún otro, podía rehusar, dadas las circunstancias.

- Muy cierto, querida -observó el señor Vanstone-. Las circunstancias, como tú dices, estaban totalmente en mi contra. Por un lado, ahí estaba esa pobre gente en un apuro, y por el otro, teníamos a Magdalen muriéndose de ganas de actuar. No puedo decir que tuviera objeciones metódicas; no tengo nada de metódico. ¿Qué otra excusa podía ofrecer? Los Marrable son personas respetables y se relacionan con la mejor sociedad en Clifton. ¿Qué daño puede sufrir Magdalen en su casa? Si de prudencia y de ese tipo de cosas se trata, ¿por qué no habría de hacer Magdalen lo que hace la señorita Marrable? ¡Vamos, vamos!, dejemos a las pobrecitas que actúen y se diviertan. También nosotros tuvimos su edad, y no vale la pena armar tanto alboroto, y eso es todo lo que tengo que decir al respecto.

Con aquella característica defensa de su propia conducta, el señor Vanstone se dirigió pausadamente al invernadero para fumarse otro cigarro.

- No se lo he dicho a papá -dijo Norah, cogiéndose del brazo de su madre de vuelta a la casa-, pero el perjuicio que puede resultar de la representación, a mi modo de ver, es la familiaridad que sin duda alentará entre Magdalen y Francis Clare.

- Estás predispuesta en contra de Frank, cariño -dijo la señora Vanstone.

Los suaves y secretos ojos color avellana de Norah se clavaron en el suelo; no dijo nada más. Sus opiniones eran inalterables, pero jamás discutía con nadie. Tenía el gran defecto de una naturaleza reservada, el defecto de la obstinación, y un gran mérito, el mérito del silencio. «¿Qué rumia tu cabeza ahora? -pensó la señorita Garth, lanzando una mirada penetrante al rostro moreno de Norah, que aún seguía bajo-. «Eres de esas personas impenetrables. Prefiero a Magdalen con todos sus caprichos; a través de ella veo la luz del día. Tú eres tan oscura como la noche.»

Transcurrieron las horas y Magdalen continuaba encerrada en su habitación. No se oyeron pisadas inquietas en las escaleras, ni una ágil lengua parloteando aquí y allá y por todas partes, desde el desván a la cocina; la casa no parecía la misma, toda vez que el elemento que siempre perturbaba la serenidad familiar se había retirado súbitamente. Impaciente por contemplar con sus propios ojos la realidad de una transformación que la experiencia pasada seguía induciéndola a negar, la señorita Garth subió al dormitorio de Magdalen, llamó dos veces a su puerta y, no recibiendo respuesta, la abrió y se asomó a su interior.

Allí estaba Magdalen, sentada en una butaca ante el largo espejo de pie, con los cabellos sueltos, absorta en el estudio de su papel y cómodamente arrebujada en su bata de mañana hasta que fuera la hora de vestirse para cenar. Y a su espalda estaba sentada la doncella, peinando lentamente los largos y espesos bucles de su señorita, con la resignación adormilada de una mujer que ha estado ocupada en ese mismo menester durante varias horas. El sol brillaba y los verdes postigos de la ventana estaban cerrados. La tenue luz caía delicadamente sobre las dos serenas figuras; sobre la pequeña cama blanca con los nudos de cinta rosa que recogían sus cortinajes y el alegre vestido dispuesto para la cena encima de ella; sobre la bañera pintada de vivos colores y su puro revestimiento de esmalte blanco; sobre el tocador, con sus dijes centelleantes, sus frascos de cristal, su campanilla de plata con un Cupido por mango, con esos pequeños lujos desordenados que adornan el altar del dormitorio de una mujer. La espléndida tranquilidad de la escena; la fría fragancia a flores y perfumes en la atmósfera; la actitud arrobada de Magdalen, abstraída en su lectura; la monótona regularidad de movimientos de la mano y el brazo de la doncella al pasar suavemente el peine por los cabellos de su señorita, una y otra vez; todo ello transmitía la misma sensación apaciguadora de quietud somnolienta y deliciosa. A un lado de la puerta estaba la luz del día y las realidades cotidianas de la vida. Al otro lado se hallaba el país de los sueños de la serenidad elísea, el santuario del imperturbable reposo.

La señorita Garth se detuvo en el umbral y contempló la habitación en silencio.

La curiosa afición de Magdalen a que la peinaran a todas horas del día y en cualquier estación del año se contaba entre las peculiaridades de su carácter, que eran notorias para todos los de la casa. Una de las chanzas favoritas de su padre consistía en decir que, en tales ocasiones, le recordaba a un gato al que acariciaban el lomo y que siempre le parecía que, si continuaban peinándola el tiempo suficiente, acabaría oyéndola ronronear. Por exagerado que pareciera, la comparación no era del todo inadecuada. El ardiente temperamento de la joven intensificaba el placer esencialmente femenino que sienten la mayoría de las mujeres al pasar el peine por sus cabellos, al punto de ensimismarse en una lujuria de sensaciones cuyo disfrute, tan serenamente expresivo, tan perezosamente profundo, sugería en realidad el de un gato doméstico bajo las caricias de una mano. Pese a que la señorita Garth estaba enterada de esta peculiaridad de su pupila, era la primera vez que la veía confirmarse asociada a un esfuerzo mental. Sintiendo la consiguiente curiosidad por saber cuánto tiempo habían ido de la mano el peinado y el estudio, aventuró la pregunta, primero a la señorita y (al no recibir contestación) después a la doncella.

- Toda la tarde, señorita, a ratos -fue la cansada respuesta-. La señorita Magdalen dice que calma sus emociones y le aclara las ideas.

Sabiendo por experiencia que toda intervención sería inútil en aquellas circunstancias, la señorita Garth giró en redondo y salió de la habitación. Sonrió cuando estuvo fuera, en el descansillo. La mente femenina consigue en ocasiones, aunque no con frecuencia, proyectarse en el futuro. La señorita Garth compadecía proféticamente al infortunado marido de Magdalen.

La cena presentó a la hermosa estudiante a la inspección familiar bajo el mismo aspecto de ensimismamiento. En cualquier otra ocasión ordinaria, el apetito de Magdalen hubiera aterrorizado a esos débiles sentimentales que fingen ignorar la influencia fundamental que la alimentación ejerce en la producción de belleza femenina. En esta ocasión Magdalen rechazó un plato tras otro con una resolución que implicaba el más raro de todos los martirios modernos: el martirio gástrico.

- He concebido el papel de Lucy -comentó con la seriedad más recatada-. La siguiente dificultad consiste en hacer que Frank conciba el papel de Falkland. No veo dónde está la gracia, estaríais todos mucho más serios si tuvierais mis responsabilidades. No, papá, hoy no quiero vino, gracias. Tengo que mantener despierta la inteligencia. Agua, Thomas, y creo que un poco más de gelatina, antes de que te la lleves.

Cuando Frank se presentó por la noche, ignorante de los elementos básicos de su papel, Magdalen lo tomó de la mano tal como una maestra de escuela de mediana edad hubiera hecho con un alumno torpe. Los escasos intentos que hizo él por alterar la grave naturaleza práctica del pasatiempo de la velada, intercalando cumplidos de pasada, los desbarató ella con la desdeñosa seguridad de una mujer con el doble de sus años. Literalmente, Magdalen metió a Frank en su papel a la fuerza. Su padre se durmió en la silla. La señora Vanstone y la señorita Garth perdieron el interés por el proceso, se retiraron al extremo más alejado de la estancia y conversaron en susurros. Se iba haciendo tarde, pero Magdalen no desfallecía en su tarea, y con igual perseverancia Norah, que había estado vigilándolos durante toda la velada, siguió vigilante hasta el final. La desconfianza ensombrecía su rostro más y más mientras contemplaba a su hermana y a Frank, viéndolos sentados tan juntos, movidos por un mismo interés y trabajando con un mismo fin. El reloj de la repisa de la chimenea señaló las once y media, antes de que la resoluta Lucy permitiera al desvalido Falkland cerrar su libro de trabajo por aquella noche.

- ¿A que es extraordinariamente inteligente? -dijo Frank al despedirse del señor Vanstone en la puerta del vestíbulo-. Volveré mañana para seguir escuchando sus opiniones, si no tiene usted objeción. Jamás lo conseguiré; no se lo diga a ella. En cuanto me enseña un parlamento, el anterior se me borra de la cabeza. Desalentador, ¿no es cierto? Buenas noches.

Faltaban dos días para el primer ensayo general. La noche de la víspera, la señora Vanstone mostró un ánimo muy decaído. Durante una entrevista privada con la señorita

Garth, volvió a referirse *motu proprio* al tema de la carta escrita desde Londres, se reprochó a sí misma su debilidad al aceptar la desvergonzada pretensión del capitán Wragge de ser pariente suyo y luego volvió a tocar el estado de su salud y la incierta perspectiva que la aguardaba en verano, con un tono de desaliento que acongojaba escuchar. Deseosa de animarla, la señorita Garth cambió de conversación lo antes posible, se refirió a la cercana función teatral y alivió los pensamientos de la señora Vanstone de toda zozobra anunciando su intención de acompañar a Magdalen a todos los ensayos y no perderla de vista hasta que estuviera de vuelta sana y salva en la casa de su padre. Así pues, cuando Frank se presentó en Combe-Raven en aquella memorable mañana, allí estaba la señorita Garth -en el papel interpolado de Argos-, dispuesta a acompañar a Lucy y a Falkland a la escena de la prueba. El ferrocarril los llevó a los tres a Evergreen Lodge puntualmente, y a la una dio comienzo el ensayo.

CAPÍTULO VI

- Espero que la señorita Vanstone se haya aprendido su papel -susurró con inquietud la señora Marrable a la señorita Garth en un rincón del teatro.

- Si el porte y el donaire hacen a la actriz, señora, la actuación de Magdalen nos asombrará a todos. -Con esta respuesta, la señorita Garth sacó su labor y se sentó para hacer su guardia en el centro del patio de butacas.

El regidor se instaló, libro en mano, en un taburete cerca del escenario y frente a él. Era un hombrecillo activo de carácter dulce y alegre, y dio la señal de empezar con un interés tan paciente por la representación como si antes no le hubiera dado el menor quebradero de cabeza y prometiera no causarle ninguno en el futuro. Los dos personajes que iniciaban la comedia de *Los rivales*, Fag y el cochero, aparecieron en escena poniendo de manifiesto la desproporción del decorado de fondo, que representaba una calle de Bath, con su estatura; exhibieron la acostumbrada incapacidad para dominar sus propios brazos, piernas y voces; hicieron varios mutis por los lugares equivocados y expresaron su total conformidad con los resultados de su actuación riendo a carcajadas entre bastidores.

- Silencio, caballeros, se lo ruego -los amonestó el alegre regidor-. Hablen todo lo alto que quieran en escena, pero el público no debe oírlos cuando estén fuera de ella. ¿Lista, señorita Marrable? ¿Lista, señorita Vanstone? Cuidado al subir la «Calle de Bath», ¡se está arrugando! Póngase de cara aquí, señorita Marrable; completamente de cara, por favor. Señorita Vanstone... -Se contuvo de pronto-. Curioso -dijo entre dientes-, ¡mira hacia el público espontáneamente!

Lucy abrió la escena con las siguientes palabras:

- Le aseguro, señora, que he estado buscado por media ciudad. No creo que haya biblioteca circulante en Bath en la que no haya estado.

El regidor dio un respingo en su asiento.

- ¡Válgame Dios!, ¡empieza a hablar sin que se lo indiquen! -El diálogo prosiguió. Lucy sacó las novelas para la lectura privada de la señorita Lydia Languish de debajo de su capa. El regidor se levantó con gran excitación. ¡Maravilloso! Magdalen no se apresuraba con los libros, no se le caían. Miró los títulos antes de leérselos a su señora y depositó *Humphry Clinker* sobre *The Tears of Sensibility* con un sagaz y ligero golpe que ponía de relieve la antítesis. Un instante después anunciaba la visita de Julia; otro, y ejecutaba la brusca reverencia de una doncella; un tercero, y salía de escena por el lado que indicaba el libreto. El regidor giró en redondo sobre su taburete y lanzó a la señorita Garth una mirada penetrante-. Perdone, señora -dijo-. La señorita Marrable me dijo antes de empezar que éste era el primer intento de la señorita en el teatro. Desde luego no es posible.

- Lo es -replicó la señorita Garth, reflejando la expresión de asombro del regidor en su propia cara. ¿Acaso la incomprensible aplicación de Magdalen en el estudio de su papel procedía verdaderamente de un serio interés en aquella actividad, un interés que implicara un talento natural?

El ensayo prosiguió. La señora corpulenta con peluca (y un corazón excelente) encarnó a la sentimental Julia desde un inveterado punto de vista trágico y utilizó el pañuelo distraídamente en la primera escena. La pariente solterona se tomó los errores lingüísticos de la señora Malaprop tan en serio, y se esforzó de forma tan extraordinaria en sus pifias, que éstas acabaron sonando como ejercicios de declamación más que como otra cosa. El desafortunado muchacho que encarnaba la última esperanza de la compañía, en el papel de sir Anthony Absolute, expresó la edad y la irascibilidad de su personaje entrechocando las rodillas de continuo y golpeando incesantemente el escenario con el bastón. Despacio y con torpeza, con interrupciones constantes y

errores interminables continuó arrastrándose el primer acto hasta que apareció Lucy para terminarlo en soliloquio, con la confesión de su fingida simplicidad y la alabanza de su propio ingenio.

Aquí el artificio escénico de la situación ofrecía dificultades con las que Magdalen no había tenido que enfrentarse en la primera escena, y aquí su absoluta falta de experiencia la llevó a cometer más de una equivocación palpable. El regidor intervino inmediatamente para corregirla, con un ansia que no había demostrado en ningún otro caso con los demás miembros de la compañía. En un momento dado, Magdalen tenía que hacer una pausa y dar una vuelta por el escenario; lo hizo. En otro, debía detenerse, menear la cabeza y mirar al público con insolencia; lo hizo. Cuando sacara el papel para leer la lista de los regalos que había recibido, ¿podía darle un golpecito con el dedo? (Sí.) ¿Podía leer los diferentes objetos lanzando al final de cada frase una mirada astuta y directa al patio de butacas? (Sí, directa al patio de butacas, y todo lo astuta que usted quiera.) El animado rostro del regidor se llenó de satisfacción. Se metió la obra bajo el brazo y aplaudió alegremente; los caballeros, apiñados entre bastidores, siguieron su ejemplo; las señoras se miraron unas a otras empezando a dudar si no habrían hecho mejor en dejar a la neófita en el retiro de la vida privada. Demasiado absorta en su trabajo sobre las tablas para prestar atención a ninguno de ellos, Magdalen pidió permiso para repetir el soliloquio y asegurarse de que había mejorado. Lo repitió de pe a pa, esta vez sin errores; el regidor celebró la atención dispensada a sus instrucciones con un estallido de aprobación profesional, que se le escapó a su pesar.

- ¡Sabe seguir las indicaciones! -exclamó el hombrecillo con una sonora palmada sobre el libro del apuntador-. ¡Es una actriz nata, si es que ha habido alguna!

- Espero que no -dijo la señorita Garth para sus adentros, reemprendiendo la labor que había dejado caer sobre su regazo y mirándola con cierta perplejidad. Sus peores temores sobre los resultados de la empresa teatral habían presagiado cierta ligereza de comportamiento con algunos de los caballeros; con aquello no había contado. En su calidad de joven irreflexiva, Magdalen era comparativamente fácil de manejar. En su carácter de actriz nata, amenazaba con plantear serias dificultades en el futuro. El ensayo prosiguió. Lucy regresó al escenario para sus escenas del segundo acto (el último en el que aparece) con sir Lucius y Fag. Aquí, una vez más, la inexperiencia la traicionó y, una vez más, su determinación al atacar y vencer sus propios errores asombró a todos. «¡Bravo!», profirieron los caballeros entre bastidores, cuando Magdalen enmendó con firmeza un error tras otro. «¡Ridículo! -exclamaron las señoras-, con un papel tan pequeño como el suyo». «¡Que Dios me perdone! -pensó la señorita Garth, aceptando de mala gana la opinión general-. Casi desearía que fuéramos papistas y tener un convento donde meterla mañana mismo.» Uno de los criados del señor Marrable entró en el teatro cuando la institutriz dejó escapar ese desesperado anhelo. Al momento envió al hombre entre bastidores con un mensaje: «La señorita Vanstone ha terminado su parte en el ensayo; pídale que venga aquí a sentarse conmigo». El criado regresó con una disculpa cortés: «Todo el afecto de la señorita Vanstone, y pide ser excusada; está apuntando al señor Clare». Le apuntó con tal resolución que Frank consiguió realmente decir su papel. Las interpretaciones de los otros caballeros fueron de una imbecilidad presuntuosa. La de Frank fue un grado mejor; era modesto en su incapacidad y salía ganando en comparación.

- Gracias a la señorita Vanstone -comentó el regidor, que había oído cómo le apuntaba Magdalen-. Ella ha sido su acicate. Vamos a desinflarnos mucho la noche de la representación, cuando caiga el telón tras el segundo acto y el público ya no la vea más. ¡Es una auténtica pena que no tenga un papel mejor!

- Es una auténtica bendición que no tenga que hacer más de lo que ya ha hecho -dijo la señorita Garth entre dientes, oyendo su comentario-. Tal como están ahora las cosas, no será fácil que la gente le haga perder la cabeza con sus aplausos. Estará fuera de la obra a partir del segundo acto, ¡es un consuelo!

No hay cabeza bien regulada que extraiga sus conclusiones con prisas; el entendimiento de la señorita Garth estaba bien regulado; por lo tanto, desde un punto de vista lógico, la señorita Garth no debería haber cedido a la debilidad de precipitarse en sus

deducciones. Sin embargo, dadas las circunstancias, cometió ese error. En pocas palabras, la consoladora reflexión que había acudido a su pensamiento daba por supuesto que por fin la obra había sobrevivido a todos sus desastres para entrar en una carrera de triunfos largamente aplazada. La obra no había hecho nada parecido. Las desgracias y la familia Marrable no habían de separarse aún.

Cuando terminó el ensayo, nadie observó que la gruesa señora de la peluca abandonaba la compañía por su cuenta, y cuando después la echaron de menos en la mesa del refrigerio que la hospitalidad del señor Marrable había dispuesto en una habitación cerca del teatro, nadie imaginó que hubiera una razón seria para su ausencia. Tuvieron que esperar a que las señoras y los caballeros se reunieran en el siguiente ensayo para comprender el verdadero alcance de la situación. No hubo Julia alguna a la hora prevista. La señora Marrable se acercó al escenario en su lugar con aire sombrío y una carta abierta en la mano. Era por naturaleza una dama de una educación exquisitamente afable, dueña de todos y cada uno de los amables convencionalismos de la lengua inglesa, pero desastres y dramáticas influencias se habían combinado de tal manera que incluso aquella inofensiva matrona hubo de perder finalmente los papeles. Por primera vez en su vida, la señora Marrable se permitió gesticular con vehemencia y utilizar un lenguaje subido de tono. Extendió el brazo en toda su longitud para entregar la carta a su hija con gran severidad.

- Querida -dijo con espantoso aplomo-, nos persigue una maldición. -Antes de que la atónita compañía teatral pudiera pedir explicaciones, dio media vuelta y abandonó la estancia. El ojo profesional del regidor la siguió con una mirada respetuosa; parecía aprobar el mutis desde un punto de vista teatral.

¿Qué nueva desgracia había caído sobre la obra? La última y peor de todas ellas la había asaltado. La señora corpulenta había renunciado a su papel.

Lo había hecho sin malicia. Su corazón, que había estado en el lugar adecuado desde el principio, seguía ocupándolo inflexiblemente. Su explicación de las circunstancias así lo demostraba al menos. La carta empezaba con una declaración: Durante el último ensayo, había oído (de un modo totalmente casual) comentarios personales de los que ella era objeto. Quizá se referían a ella o quizá no, a sus cabellos y su... figura. No quería afligir a la señorita Marrable repitiéndolos. Tampoco quería mencionar nombres, porque ella no era dada a echar leña al fuego. Su amor propio le dictaba un único camino y era el de renunciar a su papel. Lo adjuntaba por tanto a la carta, disculpándose profusamente por el atrevimiento de acometer un personaje joven con lo que un caballero se había complacido en llamar su edad y con lo que dos señoras habían tenido la grosería de calificar como sus cabellos y su figura inconvenientes. Sin duda hallarían fácilmente una intérprete más joven y más atractiva para Julia. Mientras tanto, todas las personas involucradas tenían su perdón incondicional, a lo que tan sólo rogaba que le permitieran añadir sus mejores y más afectuosos deseos sobre el éxito de la función.

Cuatro noches quedaban para que se representara la obra. Si alguna vez una empresa humana necesitó de buenos deseos para ser llevada a cabo, ¡no cabe duda de que esa empresa era la función teatral en Evergreen Lodge!

Se dio permiso para colocar una butaca en el escenario; en ella se desplomó la señorita Marrable, preámbulo de un ataque de histeria. Magdalen se acercó a la primera convulsión, le arrancó la carta de la mano y detuvo la inminente catástrofe.

- Es una vieja fea, calva y malévola -dijo Magdalen, rompiendo la carta en pedazos y arrojándolos sobre las cabezas de los presentes-. Pero una cosa puede dar por segura, no va a arruinar la función. Yo haré de Julia.

- ¡Bravo! -profirió el coro de caballeros, siendo el anónimo caballero que había contribuido al desaguisado (es decir, el señor Francis Clare) el más ruidoso de todos.

- Si quieren saber la verdad, no me asusta admitirlo -continuó Magdalen-. Yo soy una de las señoras a las que se refiere. Yo dije que tenía la cabeza como una fregona y la

cintura como una columna, y es cierto.

- Yo soy la otra señora -añadió la pariente solterona-. Pero sólo dije que era demasiado corpulenta para el papel.

- Yo soy el caballero -intervino Frank, acicateado por la fuerza del ejemplo-. No dije nada, me limité a mostrarme de acuerdo con las señoras.

Aquí la señorita Garth aprovechó la oportunidad para dirigirse al escenario en voz alta desde el patio de butacas.

- ¡Basta!, ¡basta! -dijo-. Ésta no es manera de resolverlo. Si Magdalen hace de Julia, ¿quién hará de Lucy?

La señorita Marrable volvió a desplomarse en la butaca y se vio sacudida por una segunda convulsión.

- ¡Tonterías! -exclamó Magdalen-, es bien sencillo. Yo haré de Julia y de Lucy a la vez.

Se consultó al regidor de inmediato. Los únicos cambios de importancia, necesarios para realizar el proyecto de Magdalen, parecían limitarse a suprimir la primera entrada de Lucy y convertir el corto diálogo sobre las novelas en un soliloquio de Lydia Languish. Las dos escenas en las que hablaba Lucy al final del primero y segundo actos estaban lo suficientemente alejadas de las escenas en las que aparecía Julia, para dar tiempo a las necesarias transformaciones de atuendo. Ni siquiera la señorita Garth pudo oponer nuevos obstáculos, pese a sus denodados esfuerzos por encontrarlos. La cuestión se resolvió en cinco minutos y el ensayo prosiguió con Magdalen aprendiendo las posiciones de Julia en el escenario, libro en mano. Más tarde, durante el camino de vuelta a casa, anunció que tenía la intención de permanecer levantada toda la noche para estudiar su nuevo papel. Inmediatamente Frank expresó su temor de que a Magdalen no le quedara tiempo para ayudarle a superar sus dificultades teatrales. Ella le dio coquetamente unos golpecitos en el hombro con su papel.

- Tonto, más que tonto, ¿cómo voy a arreglármelas sin ti? Tú eres el amante celoso de Julia, el que siempre está haciéndola llorar. Ven esta noche y hazme llorar a la hora de la cena. Ahora ya no tienes que actuar con una malévola vieja con peluca. Es mi corazón el que tienes que romper y, por supuesto, yo te enseñaré a hacerlo.

El intervalo de cuatro días transcurrió ajetreadamente en ensayos continuos, públicos y privados. Llegó la noche de la función; los invitados se congregaron; el gran experimento dramático se acercaba a la hora de la verdad. Magdalen había aprovechado al máximo sus oportunidades; había aprendido cuanto el regidor había podido enseñarle en aquel tiempo. La señorita Garth la dejó cuando se inició la obertura para sentarse aparte en un rincón entre bastidores, seria y silenciosa, con su frasco de sales en una mano y su libreto en la otra, preparándose resueltamente para soportar la dura prueba que se avecinaba hasta el final.

La obra dio comienzo con el acompañamiento propio de una función teatral en un círculo privado: con una apretujada multitud, una temperatura africana, el estallido de los cristales recalentados de las lámparas y dificultades para subir el telón. Fag y el cochero, que abrieron la escena, se despidieron de su memoria en cuanto pisaron el escenario; olvidaron la mitad del diálogo; se detuvieron en seco; el invisible regidor les instó a «hacer mutis», y mutis hicieron, más tristes y sabios en todos los aspectos que cuando empezaron. La siguiente escena reveló a la señorita Marrable como Lydia Languish, graciosamente sentada, muy guapa, elegantemente vestida y dueña sin la menor vacilación de cada una de sus frases; poseedora, en suma, de todo tipo de recursos personales, excepto el de la voz. Las damas la admiraron, los caballeros aplaudieron. Nadie oyó nada, salvo las palabras: «Hable más alto, señorita», susurradas por la misma voz que había incitado antes a Fag y al cochero a «hacer mutis». En respuesta, unas risas disimuladas surgieron entre los espectadores más jóvenes, contenidas rápidamente por magnánimos aplausos. El público empezaba a caldearse,

pero aún no habían perdido el sentido nacional del juego limpio.

A mitad de la representación, Magdalen hizo tranquilamente su primera entrada como Julia. Vestía de modo muy sencillo en tonos oscuros, y sin peluca; se habían reservado todos los complementos y alteraciones escénicos (excepto un levísimo toque de *rouge* en las mejillas) para disfrazarla de manera más efectiva en su segundo papel. La gracia y simplicidad de su atuendo, el firme dominio de sí misma con el que contempló los rostros ansiosos alzados hacia ella, arrancaron un murmullo de aprobación expectante. Magdalen habló (tras contener un temblor momentáneo) expresándose con una claridad total que llegó a todos los oídos y que confirmó de inmediato la impresión favorable que su aparición había producido. El único miembro del público que la miró y escuchó con frialdad fue su hermana mayor. Antes de que la estrella de la función llevara más de cinco minutos en escena, Norah había detectado con asombro indescriptible que Magdalen había individualizado audazmente la débil afabilidad del carácter de Julia inspirándose nada menos que en ella misma como modelo. Norah vio tantas pequeñas peculiaridades de sus propios modales y movimientos reproducidos desvergonzadamente, e incluso el tono de su voz tan bien imitado de vez en cuando, que se sobresaltó a veces creyendo que se oía hablar a sí misma y que el eco le respondía desde el escenario. El efecto que esta fría apropiación de la identidad de Norah con fines teatrales causó en el público (que sólo veía los resultados) se manifestó en un estallido de aplausos con el mutis de la nueva actriz. Magdalen había obtenido dos triunfos incontestables en su primera escena. Mediante una diestra imitación, había convertido en una realidad viva uno de los personajes más insípidos de la producción teatral inglesa; y había entusiasmado a un público de doscientos exiliados de las bendiciones del aire puro que hervían juntos en su propio calor animal. En estas circunstancias, ¿dónde está la actriz profesional que lo hubiera hecho mejor?

Pero el acontecimiento de la noche aún estaba por llegar. La reaparición de Magdalen disfrazada al final del acto, representando a Lucy -con peluca, cejas postizas, el cutis maquillado y las mejillas coloradas, un vestido que ostentaba los colores más llamativos y una vivacidad chillona en la voz y en las maneras-, dejó al público boquiabierto. Todos repasaron el programa, en el que la intérprete de Lucy figuraba con un nombre supuesto, volvieron a mirar el escenario, vieron más allá del disfraz y dieron rienda suelta a su asombro con otra salva de aplausos, más sonoros y sinceros incluso que los anteriores. Ni siquiera Norah pudo negar esta vez que su hermana merecía aquel tributo. Allí, abriéndose paso con seguridad pese a los defectos de la inexperiencia; allí, claramente visible incluso para el espectador más torpe, se hallaba la rara facultad de la interpretación, manifestándose en cada una de las miradas y acciones de aquella joven de dieciocho años, que pisaba las tablas por primera vez en su vida. Aun fracasando en muchos requisitos menores de la doble tarea emprendida, triunfó en la necesidad más importante de mantener las diferencias principales entre los dos personajes. Todos comprendieron que la mayor dificultad estaba ahí; todos vieron esa dificultad superada; todos se hicieron eco del entusiasmo del regidor durante los ensayos, que la había aclamado como actriz nata.

Cuando el telón cayó por primera vez, Magdalen había concentrado en su persona todo el interés y la atracción de la obra. El público aplaudió cortésmente a la señorita Marrable, como correspondía a los huéspedes reunidos en su casa, y animó al resto de la compañía con buen humor, queriendo ayudarlos a realizar una tarea para la que todos eran, en mayor o menor grado, manifiestamente incapaces. Pero, a medida que se desarrollaba la obra, nada despertaba una auténtica expresión de interés si Magdalen estaba fuera de escena. No había modo de disfrazar los hechos: la señorita Marrable y sus amigos íntimos habían sido arrojados a la sombra sin remisión por culpa de la más reciente incorporación, a la que habían invitado a ayudarlos como última esperanza. ¡Y todo ello ocurría en el cumpleaños de la señorita Marrable!, ¡y en la casa de su padre!, ¡y después de seis semanas de indescriptibles sacrificios! De todos los desastres domésticos que la inclemente función teatral había infligido a la familia Marrable, el éxito de Magdalen fue el colmo de las desgracias.

Al concluir la obra, la señorita Garth dejó al señor Vanstone y a Norah entre los invitados del comedor y fue entre bastidores, en apariencia impaciente por comprobar

si podía ser de utilidad; dispuesta, en realidad, a averiguar si a Magdalen se le había subido el triunfo a la cabeza. No se habría sorprendido de descubrir a su pupila en el acto de llegar a un acuerdo con el regidor para una actuación inminente en un teatro público. Lo cierto es que encontró a Magdalen en el escenario, recibiendo con sonrisas corteses una tarjeta que el regidor le ofrecía con una inclinación de cabeza muy profesional. Notando la mirada muda e inquisitiva de la señorita Garth, aquel amable hombrecillo se apresuró a explicar que la tarjeta era suya y que simplemente pedía a la señorita Vanstone el favor de su recomendación en cualquier oportunidad futura.

- Ésta no es la última vez que nuestra joven señorita participará en una función teatral privada, yo respondo de ello -dijo el regidor-. Y si se necesita un supervisor en la próxima ocasión, ha tenido la amabilidad de prometerme que hablará bien de mí. En esa dirección saben siempre dónde encontrarme, señorita. -Diciendo estas palabras, volvió a inclinarse y desapareció discretamente.

Vagas sospechas asaltaron el pensamiento de la señorita Garth, impulsándola a insistir en ver la tarjeta. Jamás había cambiado de manos un pedazo de cartulina más inofensivo. La tarjeta no contenía más que el nombre del regidor y, debajo, el nombre y la dirección de un agente teatral de Londres.

- No vale la pena guardarla -dijo la señorita Garth.

Magdalen le cogió la mano antes de que pudiera tirar la tarjeta, se apoderó de ella al instante y se la metió en el bolsillo.

- He prometido recomendarle -dijo-, y ésa es una razón para guardar esta tarjeta. Cuando menos me recordará la noche más feliz de mi vida, y ésa es otra. ¡Vamos! -exclamó, abrazando a la señorita Garth con euforia-, ¡felicíteme por mi éxito!

- Te felicitaré cuando lo hayas superado -dijo la señorita Garth. Media hora más tarde Magdalen se había cambiado de vestido para unirse a los invitados y elevarse a una nube de felicitaciones, lejos del alcance de cualquier influencia y control que la señorita Garth pudiera ejercer sobre ella. Frank, lento en todas sus acciones, fue el último de la compañía teatral en abandonar la zona del escenario. No hizo esfuerzo alguno por acercarse a Magdalen en el comedor, pero estaba preparado en el vestíbulo, con su capa en las manos, cuando se pidieron los carruajes y la velada concluyó.

- ¡Oh, Frank! -dijo ella, mirando hacia atrás mientras él le ponía la capa sobre los hombros-. ¡Siento tanto que se haya acabado todo! Ven mañana por la mañana y charlaremos de todo esto los dos solos.

- ¿En la arboleda a las diez? -preguntó Frank en un susurro.

Magdalen se echó la capucha de la capa sobre la cabeza y asintió alegremente. La señorita Garth, que estaba cerca, observó las miradas que se intercambiaron, aun cuando el ruido que hacían los invitados al partir le impidió oír las palabras. Había una dulce ternura implícita en la fingida actitud bulliciosa de Magdalen; había una súbita seriedad en su rostro, una soltura confidencial en su mano, cuando se colgó del brazo de Frank y salió para subir al carruaje. ¿Qué significaba aquello? ¿Acaso su interés pasajero por él, como pupilo en el arte dramático, había plantado traicioneramente la semilla de un interés más profundo en Frank, como hombre? ¿Acaso el frívolo entretenimiento teatral tendría que responder, una vez terminado, de resultados más graves que una dañina pérdida de tiempo? Las arrugas del rostro de la señorita Garth se hicieron más profundas y duras; permaneció inmóvil, perdida en medio de la multitud que revoloteaba alrededor de ella. Le vino a la memoria la advertencia de Norah, dirigida a la señora Vanstone en el jardín, y entonces, por primera vez, se le ocurrió la idea de que Norah había sabido ver las auténticas consecuencias.

CAPÍTULO VII

A la mañana siguiente temprano, la señorita Garth y Norah se encontraron en el jardín y hablaron en privado. El único resultado visible de esta conversación, cuando se presentaron en la mesa del desayuno, fue el marcado silencio que ambas mantuvieron sobre el tema de la representación teatral. Todo lo que la señora Vanstone oyó sobre el entretenimiento de la velada se lo debió enteramente a su marido y a su hija menor. Era evidente que la institutriz y la hija mayor habían resuelto olvidar ese asunto.

Después del desayuno, Magdalen no se contaba entre las señoras que se reunieron en la salita como de costumbre. Sus hábitos eran tan irregulares que la señora Vanstone no se sorprendió ni sintió inquietud alguna por su ausencia. La señorita Garth y Norah intercambiaron una mirada de entendimiento y aguardaron en silencio. Transcurrieron dos horas, y Magdalen seguía sin aparecer. Norah se levantó cuando el reloj daba las doce y abandonó la habitación sin decir nada para ir en su busca.

No estaba arriba quitándole el polvo a sus joyas y desordenando sus vestidos. No estaba en el invernadero ni en el jardín; no estaba en la cocina chanceándose de la cocinera, ni en el patio jugando con los perros. ¿Por ventura había salido con su padre? En la mesa del desayuno, el señor Vanstone había expresado su intención de realizar una visita matinal a su viejo amigo, el señor Clare, y de despertar la indignación sarcástica del filósofo con el relato de la representación teatral. Ninguna de las otras señoras de Combe-Raven se aventuraba jamás a ir a la casa del señor Clare, pero la irreflexiva Magdalen era capaz de cualquier cosa, y quizá se encontrara allí. La idea se le ocurrió cuando se adentraba por el sendero de la arboleda.

En el segundo recodo, donde el sendero entre los árboles se alejaba serpenteando y no se veía ya desde la casa, Norah se encontró de repente cara a cara con Magdalen y Frank; paseaban cogidos del brazo, con las cabezas muy juntas, aparentemente conversando en susurros, y parecían sospechosamente hermosos y felices. Ambos se sobresaltaron cuando apareció Norah y detuvieron sus pasos. Frank alzó el sombrero con aire aturdido y dio media vuelta en dirección a la casa de su padre. Magdalen avanzó para reunirse con su hermana, balanceando despreocupadamente su sombrilla cerrada, tarareando despreocupadamente la melodía de la obertura que la víspera había precedido a la subida del telón.

- ¡La hora de comer ya! -dijo, consultando su reloj-. No es posible.

- ¿Habéis estado tú y el señor Francis Clare solos en la arboleda desde las diez? -preguntó Norah.

- ¡El señor Francis Clare! Qué ridículamente formal eres. ¿Por qué no le llamas Frank?

- Te he hecho una pregunta, Magdalen.

- ¡Dios mío, qué sombría estás esta mañana! Supongo que he caído en desgracia. ¿Aún no me has perdonado por mi actuación de anoche? No pude evitarlo, cariño; no habría conseguido hacer nada con Julia si no te hubiera tomado como modelo. Es una mera cuestión artística. Yo en tu lugar me hubiera sentido halagada por la elección.

- Yo, en el tuyo, Magdalen, me lo hubiera pensado dos veces antes de imitar a mi hermana delante de un público compuesto por desconocidos.

- Precisamente por eso lo hice, porque eran desconocidos. ¿Cómo iban a saberlo? ¡Vamos, vamos!, no te enfades. Eres ocho años mayor que yo, deberías darme ejemplo de buen humor.

- Te daré ejemplo de hablar con franqueza. ¡No tengo palabras para expresar cuánto siento encontrarte aquí, Magdalen, como acabo de encontrarte!

- ¿Qué vendrá ahora?, me pregunto. Me has encontrado en la arboleda de casa, charlando sobre una función privada con mi viejo compañero de juegos, al que conozco desde que no era más alta que esta sombrilla. Y eso es una indecencia manifiesta, ¿no? *Honi soit qui mal y pense*. Hace un momento querías una respuesta, ahí la tienes, querida, en el más selecto francés normando.

- Hablo en serio, Magdalen...

- No lo dudo. Nadie puede acusarte de que estés de broma alguna vez.

- Lamento seriamente...

- ¡Dios mío!

- Es completamente inútil que me interrumpas. Mi conciencia me dicta que te diga, y te lo diré, que lamento ver la forma en que está aumentando vuestra intimidad. Lamento ver que se ha establecido ya un entendimiento secreto entre el señor Francis Clare y tú.

- ¡Pobre Frank! Cómo debes de odiarle. ¿Qué rábanos te ha hecho para ofenderte tanto?

El dominio que tenía Norah de sí misma empezaba a flaquear. Sus morenas mejillas enrojecieron, sus delicados labios temblaron antes de que volviera a hablar. Magdalen prestaba más atención a su sombrilla que a su hermana. La lanzó al aire y la atrapó.

- ¡Uno! -dijo, y volvió a lanzarla-. ¡Dos! -Y la lanzó aún más alto-. ¡Tres! -Antes de que pudiera recogerla por tercera vez, Norah la aferró impetuosamente por el brazo y la sombrilla cayó al suelo entre las dos.

- Eres cruel conmigo -dijo-. ¡Qué vergüenza, Magdalen, qué vergüenza!

El estallido incontenible de una naturaleza reservada, obligada a una franca agresividad a su pesar, es, de todas las fuerzas morales, la más difícil de resistir. Magdalen calló, sorprendida. Por un momento, las dos hermanas, tan extrañamente distintas en carácter y en apariencia, se miraron cara a cara sin que mediara palabra entre ellas. Por un momento, los oscuros ojos castaños de la mayor y los claros ojos grises de la más joven se escudriñaron fijamente sin que ninguna de las dos cediera. El rostro de Norah fue el primero en cambiar; la cabeza de Norah fue la primera en volverse. Norah dejó caer en silencio el brazo de su hermana. Magdalen se agachó y recogió su sombrilla.

- Intento controlar mi genio -dijo-, y me llamas cruel por ello. Siempre has sido dura conmigo y siempre lo serás.

Norah enlazó con fuerza sus temblorosas manos.

- ¡Dura contigo! -dijo en tono bajo y lastimero, y suspiró amargamente.

Magdalen se echó hacia atrás y limpió de polvo la sombrilla de forma mecánica con el bajo de su capa de paseo.

- ¡Sí! -prosiguió obstinadamente-. Dura conmigo y dura con Frank.

- ¡Frank! -repitió Norah, avanzando hacia su hermana y palideciendo tan repentinamente como antes había enrojecido-. ¿Hablas de Frank y de ti como si vuestros intereses ya fueran uno solo? ¡Magdalen! Si te hiero a ti, ¿lo hiero también a él? ¿Tan cercano y tan querido es para ti?

Magdalen retrocedió más y más. La capa se le enganchó en la rama de un árbol cercano. Se volvió con irritación, quebró la rama y la arrojó al suelo.

- ¿Qué derecho tienes a interrogarme? -espetó de pronto-. ¿Qué te importa a ti si me gusta o no me gusta Frank? -Diciendo estas palabras avanzó de repente para pasar junto a su hermana de vuelta a la casa.

Cada vez más pálida, Norah le cerró el paso.

- Si te retengo a la fuerza -dijo-, te detendrás y me oirás. He observado a Francis Clare; lo conozco mejor que tú. Es indigno de que pienses seriamente en él ni por un momento; es indigno del interés de nuestro querido y bondadoso padre. Un hombre con unos mínimos principios, con honor, con sentido de la gratitud, no hubiera vuelto como ha vuelto él, deshonrado. ¡Sí!, deshonrado por la falta de energía y la negligencia demostradas en el cumplimiento de su deber. Observé su rostro mientras el amigo que ha sido más que un padre para él le consolaba y le perdonaba con una bondad que no merecía; observé su rostro, y no vi vergüenza ni congoja en él; no vi nada más que una expresión de alivio insensible y desagradecido. Es un egoísta, es un ingrato, carece de generosidad, tiene sólo veinte años y muestra ya los peores defectos de un viejo mezquino. Y ése es el hombre con el que te encuentro citada en secreto, ¡el hombre que ha conseguido hasta tal punto hacerse con tu favor que te ha vuelto sorda a la verdad sobre él, incluso de mis propios labios! ¡Magdalen!, esto acabará mal. ¡Por amor de Dios, piensa en lo que te he dicho y domínate antes de que sea demasiado tarde! -Se interrumpió, vehemente y sin aliento, y buscó con ansia la mano de su hermana.

Magdalen la miró con asombro no disimulado.

- Te portas de una forma tan violenta -dijo- y tan ajena a ti que no te reconozco. Cuanto más paciente soy, más duras palabras recibo como recompensa a mis esfuerzos. Se ha adueñado de ti un odio perverso hacia Frank y sientes un enojo irracional hacia mí porque yo no le odio también. ¡Norah, no!, me haces daño en la mano.

Norah soltó su mano con desprecio.

- Jamás le haré daño a tu corazón -dijo, y de repente dio la espalda a su hermana mientras hablaba.

Se produjo una pausa momentánea. Norah se mantuvo en su posición. Magdalen la miró con perplejidad, vaciló, luego se alejó sola hacia la casa. Se detuvo en el recodo del sendero entre los árboles y miró hacia atrás con inquietud.

«¡Dios mío, Dios mío! -pensó-. ¿Por qué no se habrá ido Frank cuando se lo he dicho?» Vaciló y retrocedió unos cuantos pasos. «Ahí está Norah, insistiendo en su dignidad, tan obstinada como siempre.» Se detuvo de nuevo. «¿Qué será lo mejor? Odio las peleas; creo que haré las paces.» Se acercó a su hermana y la tocó en el hombro. Norah no se movió un ápice. «No se exalta a menudo -se dijo Magdalen, tocándola otra vez-, pero cuando lo hace, ¡cuánto le dura!»

- ¡Vamos! -dijo-, dame un beso, Norah, y hagamos las paces. ¿No dejarás que me acerque a ninguna otra parte de ti más que a tu nuca, querida? Bueno, es un cuello muy bonito, merece más ser besado que el mío, ¡y ahí está el beso, mal que te pese!

Magdalen cogió a Norah con fuerza por detrás e hizo realidad sus palabras con una total indiferencia hacia todo lo ocurrido poco antes que su hermana estaba lejos de emular. Apenas hacía un minuto que el corazón de Norah había estallado en una intensa efusión, superando todos los obstáculos. ¿Había vuelto a enfriarla ya su helada reserva? Era difícil decirlo. No habló, no cambió de posición, tan sólo buscó su pañuelo precipitadamente. Cuando lo sacaba, se oyeron pasos acercándose desde la parte más densa de la arboleda. Un terrier escocés apareció correteando y una alegre voz cantó los primeros versos del coro en *Como gustéis*.

- ¡Es papá! -exclamó Magdalen-. Ven, Norah. Vamos a buscarlo.

En lugar de seguir a su hermana, Norah se echó el velo de la pamela sobre la cara, giró en dirección opuesta y volvió presurosa a la casa.

Allí corrió escaleras arriba hasta su dormitorio y se encerró en él. Lloraba amargamente.

CAPÍTULO VIII

Cuando Magdalen y su padre se encontraron en el sendero de la arboleda, el rostro del señor Vanstone dejaba traslucir que algo le había complacido desde que había abandonado su casa por la mañana. Respondió de inmediato a la pregunta que la curiosidad de su hija le dirigió comunicándole que acababa de visitar la pequeña casa del señor Clare y que, en aquel lugar tan poco prometedor, había recogido una noticia sorprendente para la familia de Combé-Raven.

Al entrar en el estudio del filósofo esa mañana, el señor Vanstone lo había hallado demorándose aún en su tardío desayuno con una carta abierta al lado en lugar del libro que, en otras ocasiones, tenía al alcance de la mano durante sus comidas. El señor Clare alzó la carta en cuanto su visitante entró en la estancia e inició la conversación bruscamente preguntando al señor Vanstone si estaba bien de los nervios y si se sentía lo bastante fuerte para la conmoción de una sorpresa abrumadora.

- ¿Nervios? -repitió el señor Vanstone-. Gracias a Dios, que yo sepa a mis nervios no les pasa nada. Si tiene algo que decirme, con conmoción o sin ella, suéltelo sin más.

El señor Clare alzó un poco más la carta y frunció el entrecejo a su visitante desde el otro lado de la mesa del desayuno.

- ¿Qué le he dicho siempre? -preguntó, con la expresión y las maneras más agrias y solemnes.

- Muchas más cosas de las que puedo conservar en la memoria -respondió el señor Vanstone.

- Y tanto en presencia de usted como sin usted delante -continuó el señor Clare-, siempre he sostenido que el fenómeno más importante de la sociedad moderna es... la enorme prosperidad de los tontos. Muéstreme a un tonto cualquiera y yo le mostraré una sociedad que dará a ese personaje altamente favorecido nueve oportunidades de cada diez y que, en la décima, hará rechinar los dientes ante el hombre más sabio que exista. Allá donde mire, en todos los grandes cargos hay siempre un asno, instalado fuera del alcance de todos los grandes intelectos de este mundo para que no puedan derribarlo. La imbecilidad complaciente es el soberano supremo que rige nuestro sistema social; apaga la luz inquisitiva de la inteligencia con total impunidad y ulula como una lechuza ante cualquier forma de protesta: «¡Fijaos en lo bien que nos desenvolvemos todos en la oscuridad!». Un día de éstos esa audaz afirmación será rebatida en la práctica y todo el podrido sistema de la sociedad moderna se desplomará con un estallido.

- ¡Dios no lo quiera! -exclamó el señor Vanstone, mirando en derredor como si el estallido estuviera a punto de producirse.

- ¡Con un estallido! -repitió el señor Clare-. Ésa es mi teoría, en pocas palabras. Pasemos ahora a la notable aplicación de la misma, que esta carta sugiere. Ahí tenemos al patán de mi hijo...

- ¡No me diga que Frank va a tener otra oportunidad! -exclamó el señor Vanstone.

- Ahí tenemos a ese bobo sin remisión de Frank -prosiguió el filósofo-. Jamás ha hecho nada en la vida para ayudarse a sí mismo y, como consecuencia necesaria, la sociedad trama una conspiración para encumbrarlo. Apenas ha tenido tiempo para echar por la borda esa oportunidad que le brindó usted cuando llega esta carta y pone la pelota a sus pies una segunda vez. Mi primo rico (que intelectualmente es digno de estar a la cola de la familia y, por lo tanto, claro está, se halla a su cabeza) ha tenido la amabilidad de recordar que existo y ha ofrecido sus influencias para ayudar a mi hijo primogénito. Lea esta carta y luego fíjese en la serie de acontecimientos. Mi primo rico es un bobo que medra con los bienes raíces; ha hecho algo para otro bobo que medra en política y

que, a su vez, conoce a un tercer bobo que medra en el comercio y que puede hacer algo por un cuarto bobo, que por el momento no medra con nada, cuyo nombre es Frank. Así sigue girando la rueda. Así las mejores recompensas humanas las disfrutan los tontos en interminable sucesión. Mañana despacharé a Frank. A su debido tiempo, volverá a nuestras manos como un chelín falso; otras oportunidades se cruzarán en su camino como consecuencia necesaria de su meritoria imbecilidad. Pasarán los años, puede que yo no viva para verlo, ni tampoco usted; no importa, el futuro de Frank es igualmente cierto; métalo en el ejército, en la Iglesia, la política, lo que prefiera, y deje que lo arrastre la corriente: acabará siendo general, obispo o ministro, gracias al gran mérito moderno de no hacer nada en absoluto para merecer ese puesto. -Con este resumen de las perspectivas mundanas de su hijo, el señor Clare arrojó la carta con desprecio al otro lado de la mesa y se sirvió otra taza de té.

El señor Vanstone leyó la carta con ávido interés y placer. Estaba escrita en un tono de cordialidad algo empalagoso, pero las ventajas prácticas que ofrecía a Frank estaban fuera de toda duda. El que escribía tenía medios para aprovechar el interés de un amigo en una gran firma mercantil de la City (un interés fuera de lo común), y había ejercido dicha influencia de inmediato en favor del primogénito del señor Clare. Frank sería recibido en la empresa en condiciones muy distintas a las de un vulgar oficinista; se le «daría un empujón» a la más mínima oportunidad, y la primera «cosa buena» que pudiera ofrecer la casa, tanto en el país como en el extranjero, se pondría a su disposición. Si poseía aptitudes y mostraba una cierta diligencia en aplicarlas, su fortuna estaba hecha, y cuanto antes fuera enviado a Londres para empezar, mejor para sus intereses.

- ¡Qué maravillosa noticia! -exclamó el señor Vanstone, devolviendo la carta-. Estoy encantado. Tengo que volver y contarlo en casa. Esta oportunidad es cincuenta veces mejor que la mía. ¿Qué demonios quería decir usted con eso de los abusos de la sociedad? La sociedad se ha portado extraordinariamente bien, en mi opinión. ¿Dónde está Frank?

- Escondido -dijo el señor Clare-. Una de las intolerables peculiaridades de los patanes es que siempre andan escondiéndose por ahí. No he visto a mi patán esta mañana. Si lo encuentra en alguna parte, déle un puntapié y dígale que quiero verle.

La opinión del señor Clare sobre los hábitos de su hijo podría haber sido expresada con mayor cortesía en su forma, pero en cuanto al contenido, resultó estar en lo cierto aquella mañana en particular. Tras dejar a Magdalen, Frank había aguardado entre los árboles a distancia segura con la esperanza de que abandonara la compañía de su hermana y volviera junto a él. La aparición del señor Vanstone inmediatamente después de la partida de Norah no le animó a mostrarse, sino que le resolvió a regresar a su casa. Volvió caminando con descontento, y así cayó en las garras de su padre, totalmente desprevenido ante el anuncio, por parte de tan formidable autoridad, de que partía para Londres.

Mientras tanto el señor Vanstone había comunicado la noticia, en primer lugar a Magdalen y luego, de vuelta en casa, a su esposa y a la señorita Garth. Era un hombre demasiado despistado para observar que Magdalen parecía extrañamente sobresaltada y la señorita Garth extrañamente aliviada por el anuncio de la buena fortuna de Frank. Charló sobre él sin recelar nada en absoluto, hasta que sonó la campana del almuerzo y entonces, por primera vez, notó la ausencia de Norah. Ésta envió recado abajo, cuando ya se habían sentado a la mesa, diciendo que un dolor de cabeza le impedía salir de su habitación. Cuando la señorita Garth subió poco después para comunicarle la noticia de Frank, cosa extraña, Norah no pareció demasiado aliviada al oírla. El señor Francis Clare se había ido ya en una ocasión anterior (señaló) y había regresado. Podía volver de nuevo, y antes de lo que ellos creían. No dijo más sobre ese tema; no hizo referencia a lo que había ocurrido en la arboleda. Su inquebrantable reserva parecía haberse fortalecido desde su arrebato de la mañana. Se encontró con Magdalen más tarde como si nada hubiera ocurrido; no se produjo reconciliación formal entre ellas. Una de las peculiaridades de Norah era que huía de reconciliaciones ratificadas abiertamente y se refugiaba con timidez en las reconciliaciones silenciosas e implícitas. Magdalen comprendió, por su expresión y su actitud, que su hermana había hecho su primera y

última protesta. Fuera por orgullo, malhumor, o poca confianza en sí misma, o porque desesperara de obtener algún bien, el resultado no ofrecía lugar a dudas: Norah había decidido seguir siendo pasiva en el futuro.

Esa tarde, el señor Vanstone sugirió un paseo en coche a su hija mayor como el mejor remedio para su dolor de cabeza. Ella aceptó de buena gana acompañar a su padre, quien propuso entonces, como de costumbre, que Magdalen fuera con ellos. No la encontraron por ninguna parte. Por segunda vez aquel día se había adentrado sola en los jardines. En esta ocasión la señorita Garth -que, tras adoptar las opiniones de Norah, había pasado del extremo de no hacer el más mínimo caso a Frank al otro extremo de creerle capaz de planear una fuga en cinco minutos- se ofreció a salir inmediatamente y hacer todo lo posible por encontrar a la joven desaparecida. Tras una prolongada ausencia, volvió sin éxito, con la absoluta certeza de que Magdalen y Frank se habían encontrado en secreto en alguna parte, pero sin haber descubierto el menor indicio que confirmara sus sospechas. Para entonces el carruaje se hallaba en la puerta y el señor Vanstone no deseaba esperar más. Él y Norah se fueron juntos, y la señora Vanstone y la señorita Garth se sentaron en casa con sus respectivas labores.

Media hora más tarde Magdalen entró en la habitación tranquilamente. Estaba pálida y deprimida. Recibió las reconvenciones de la señorita Garth con cansada distracción; explicó con indiferencia que había estado deambulando por el bosque; eligió unos libros y volvió a dejarlos; suspiró con impaciencia y subió a su habitación.

- Creo que Magdalen está acusando la reacción de ayer -dijo la señora Vanstone serenamente-. Es tal como pensábamos. Ahora que se ha terminado la diversión teatral, le preocupa que no haya más.

Se presentaba aquí la oportunidad de iluminar a la señora Vanstone con la luz de la verdad, demasiado favorable para desperdiciarla. La señorita Garth consultó con su conciencia, vio la ocasión y la aprovechó al punto.

- Olvida -dijo- que cierto vecino nuestro se marcha mañana. ¿Le digo la verdad? Magdalen está preocupada por la partida de Francis Clare.

La señora Vanstone alzó la vista de su labor con una leve sonrisa de sorpresa.

- No es posible -dijo-. Es natural que Frank se sienta atraído por Magdalen, pero no creo que Magdalen corresponda a ese sentimiento. Frank es tan distinto a ella, tan tranquilo y reservado, tan aburrido e incapaz, pobrecillo, en algunas cosas... Es apuesto, lo sé, pero es tan completamente distinto a Magdalen que no lo creo posible, desde luego que no.

- ¡Mi querida y buena señora! -exclamó la señorita Garth con gran asombro-, ¿supone de verdad que las personas se enamoran unas de otras por las similitudes de su carácter? En la gran mayoría de los casos es justamente lo contrario. Los hombres se casan con las últimas mujeres, y las mujeres con los últimos hombres, que sus amigos hubieran creído posible que les gustaran. Ninguna frase acude con mayor frecuencia a nuestros labios que ésta: «¿Qué le habrá encontrado el señor Tal a esa mujer para casarse con ella?», o «¿Cómo ha podido la señora Tal echarse a perder casándose con ese hombre?». ¿Todavía no le ha enseñado toda su experiencia del mundo que las chicas se encaprichan obcecadamente de hombres que son totalmente indignos de ellas?

- Muy cierto -dijo la señora Vanstone serenamente-. Lo había olvidado. Aun así, parece inexplicable, ¿no cree?

- ¡Inexplicable, porque ocurre todos los días! -exclamó la señorita Garth en tono de chanza-. Conozco a muchas personas excelentes que argumentan en contra de esta experiencia evidente del mismo modo que leen los periódicos por la mañana y niegan por la noche que la vida moderna ofrezca romanticismo alguno sobre el que puedan trabajar escritores o pintores. En serio, señora Vanstone, le doy mi palabra, gracias a esa desdichada función teatral Magdalen está siguiendo con Frank el mismo camino que muchas jovencitas han recorrido antes que ella. Frank es completamente indigno

de ella; es, casi en todos los aspectos, su opuesto, y por esa misma razón, sin saberlo, se ha enamorado de él. Magdalen es decidida e impetuosa, inteligente y dominante; no es una de esas mujeres modélicas que quieren un hombre a quien respetar y que las proteja; su pretendiente ideal (aunque quizá ella no lo haya pensado) es un hombre al que pueda dominar. ¡Bueno!, es un consuelo que haya hombres mucho mejores, incluso de esa índole, que Frank. Es una suerte que se vaya antes de que tengamos que inquietarnos más por ellos y de que el daño sea irreparable.

- ¡Pobre Frank! -dijo la señora Vanstone con una sonrisa compasiva-. Lo conocemos desde que iba en pantalón corto y Magdalen llevaba delantales. No nos rindamos todavía con él. Puede que lo haga mejor esta segunda vez.

La señorita Garth alzó la vista, atónita.

- Y suponiendo que lo haga mejor -dijo-, ¿qué pasará?

La señora Vanstone cortó un hilo suelto de su labor y rió de buena gana.

- Mi buena amiga -dijo-, hay un viejo proverbio que nos recomienda no vender el choto antes de parir la cabra. Esperemos un poco antes de vender el nuestro.

No era fácil hacer callar a la señorita Garth cuando ésta hablaba bajo la influencia de una firme convicción, pero esta réplica selló sus labios. Reanudó su labor y pensó cosas inexpresables que se reflejaron en su fisonomía.

El comportamiento de la señora Vanstone era ciertamente extraordinario en aquellas circunstancias. Por un lado se encontraba una joven -con un gran atractivo personal, con perspectivas pecuniarias poco habituales, con una posición social que hubiera justificado la propuesta de matrimonio del mejor caballero de la vecindad- arrojándose tercamente en brazos de un joven perezoso sin dinero, que había fracasado en su primer comienzo en la vida y que, aun triunfando en su segundo intento, no se hallaría en los años venideros en posición de casarse con una señorita de fortuna en condiciones de igualdad. ¡Y por el otro, se encontraba la madre de la joven, libre de toda angustia ante la perspectiva de una unión que estaba lejos de ser deseable, por no decir otra cosa, y que no estaba segura en absoluto, a juzgar por sus propias palabras y expresiones, de que el matrimonio entre la hija del señor Vanstone y el hijo del señor Clare no fuera un resultado para la intimidad entre los dos jóvenes tan satisfactorio como los padres de ambos pudieran haber deseado! Era muy desconcertante. Era casi tan incomprensible como aquel otro misterio -el misterio ya olvidado- del viaje a Londres.

Frank hizo su aparición por la noche y anunció que su padre le había sentenciado cruelmente a abandonar Combe-Raven en el tren parlamentario de la mañana siguiente. Mencionó esta circunstancia con un aire de resignación sentimental y escuchó las ruidosas expresiones de júbilo del señor Vanstone acerca de sus nuevos proyectos con una leve y silenciosa sorpresa. La suave melancolía de esta actitud aumentó considerablemente sus encantos personales. A su modo afeminado, estaba más apuesto que nunca aquella noche. Sus dulces ojos castaños vagaron por la habitación con una inefable ternura; llevaba los cabellos bellamente peinados; sus delicadas manos colgaban de los brazos de la silla con gracia lánguida. Parecía un Apolo convaleciente. Jamás en ninguna ocasión anterior había practicado con mayor éxito el arte social que solía cultivar: el arte de presentarse en sociedad en el papel de un íncubo bien educado y hacer que sus congéneres se sintieran agradecidos por permitirles sentarse a sus pies. Fue innegablemente una velada aburrida. El señor Vanstone y la señorita Garth llevaron todo el peso de la conversación. La señora Vanstone acostumbraba guardar silencio; Norah se mantenía obstinadamente en un segundo término; Magdalen estaba más callada y menos efusiva que en ninguna otra ocasión precedente. Se mantuvo tensa y en guardia desde el comienzo hasta el fin. Las pocas miradas significativas que lanzó a Frank cayeron sobre él como relámpagos y se esfumaron antes de que ningún otro pudiera verlas. Incluso cuando le llevó el té, y cuando, al hacerlo, perdió el dominio de

sí misma ante la tentación que ninguna mujer puede resistir -la tentación de tocar al hombre que ama-, incluso entonces, sostuvo el platillo con tal destreza que éste ocultó su mano. El dominio que Frank tenía de sí mismo era mucho menos disciplinado; sólo duró mientras permaneció pasivo. Cuando se levantó para marcharse, cuando notó la cálida presión de los dedos de Magdalen ciñéndole la mano y el rizo de cabellos que deslizó en ella en aquel momento, se volvió torpe y confuso. Hubiera traicionado a Magdalen y a sí mismo de no ser por el señor Vanstone, que cubrió su retirada con toda la inocencia del mundo acompañándole afuera sin dejar de palmearle el hombro.

- ¡Que Dios te bendiga, Frank! -exclamó la voz amiga que jamás tenía una nota áspera para nadie-. Te aguarda la fortuna. Ve, muchacho, ve y conquístala.

- Sí -dijo Frank-. Gracias. Será bastante difícil llegar y conquistarla, al principio. Por supuesto, como usted siempre me ha dicho, es deber de un hombre vencer sus dificultades y no hablar de ellas. Al mismo tiempo, desearía no sentirme tan inseguro a la hora de hacer cuentas. Es descorazonador sentirse inseguro a la hora de hacerlas. Oh, sí, escribiré para decirle qué tal me va. Le estoy muy agradecido por su amabilidad y lamento mucho no haber tenido éxito con la ingeniería. Creo que me habría gustado más la ingeniería que el comercio. Ahora ya no tiene remedio, ¿no? Gracias de nuevo. Adiós.

De este modo se alejó para adentrarse en un nebuloso futuro comercial, tan perdido, tan pusilánime, tan caballero como siempre.

CAPÍTULO IX

Transcurrieron tres meses. Durante ese tiempo, Frank permaneció en Londres desempeñando sus deberes y escribiendo de vez en cuando para informar al señor Vanstone, como había prometido.

Sus cartas no demostraban entusiasmo alguno por la profesión mercantil. Seguía manifestándose lamentablemente inseguro en sus cuentas. También estaba más convencido que nunca -cuando por desgracia era ya demasiado tarde- de que prefería la ingeniería al comercio. Pese a esta convicción; pese a los dolores de cabeza causados por permanecer sentado en un taburete alto, agachado sobre libros de contabilidad y en un ambiente malsano; pese a la ausencia de vida social, y a los desayunos apresurados, y las malas comidas en *chop-houses*, acudía regularmente a la oficina y su diligencia en el pupitre era infatigable. Remitía al señor Vanstone al jefe del departamento en el que trabajaba si aquél deseaba corroborar estas afirmaciones. Tal era el tono general de sus cartas, y el destinatario de éstas y el padre de Frank discrepaban sobre ellas de manera tan radical como de costumbre. El señor Vanstone las aceptaba como pruebas del firme progreso de ciertos principios de amor al trabajo en el que las escribía. El señor Clare adoptó su característico punto de vista opuesto.

- Estos hombres de Londres -dijo el filósofo- no dejan que los patanes les tomen el pelo. Tienen cogido a Frank por el pescuezo, él no puede desasirse y convierte en mérito el haber cedido ante la pura necesidad.

El intervalo de tres meses de prueba para Frank en Londres pasó con menor animación de lo habitual entre los habitantes de Combe-Raven.

A medida que se acercaba el verano y pese a denodados esfuerzos por dominar su estado de ánimo, la señora Vanstone se hallaba cada vez más deprimida.

- Hago todo lo posible -comentó a la señorita Garth-; doy ejemplo de alegría a mi marido y a mis hijas, pero temo que llegue el mes de julio.

Las secretas aprensiones de Norah con respecto a su hermana la volvieron más seria y menos comunicativa de lo acostumbrado a medida que avanzaba el año. Incluso el señor Vanstone perdió parte de su flexibilidad de ánimo cuando se acercó el mes de julio. Guardó las apariencias en presencia de su esposa, pero en todas las demás ocasiones su aspecto y sus maneras adquirieron una perceptible sombra de tristeza. Magdalen estaba tan cambiada desde la marcha de Frank, que contribuía al abatimiento general en lugar de aliviarlo. Todos sus movimientos se volvieron lánguidos; todos sus quehaceres habituales los desempeñaba con la misma cansada indiferencia; pasaba las horas sola en su habitación; perdió el interés por lucir hermosos y alegres vestidos; tenía los párpados pesados, los nervios irritables, su cutis había empeorado visiblemente; en una palabra, se había convertido en una opresión y un aburrimiento para sí misma y para cuantos la rodeaban. Por más que la señorita Garth combatió estas crecientes dificultades domésticas con vigor, también su ánimo empezó a flaquear con el esfuerzo. Su memoria volvía, cada vez con mayor frecuencia, a la mañana del mes de marzo en que los señores de la casa habían partido hacia Londres y se había producido el primer cambio serio en muchos años en la atmósfera familiar. ¿Cuándo se aclararía esa atmósfera de nuevo? ¿Cuándo dejarían paso las nubes del cambio al sol de tiempos pasados más felices?

Pasó la primavera y los comienzos del verano. El temido mes de julio llegó con sus noches sin brisa, sus mañanas despejadas y sus días sofocantes.

El día quince de ese mes, ocurrió algo que tomó a todos por sorpresa salvo a Norah. Por segunda vez, sin la menor razón aparente -por segunda vez, sin una palabra de aviso por anticipado-, ¡Frank reapareció en la casa de su padre!

Los labios del señor Clare se abrieron para saludar el regreso de su hijo en el viejo

papel de «chelín falso» y se cerraron de nuevo sin pronunciar una palabra. La prodigiosa compostura de las maneras de Frank delataba que la noticia que le iba a comunicar no era la de su despido. Frank respondió a la inquisitiva expresión sardónica de su padre explicándole al punto que aquella misma mañana en la oficina le habían hecho una propuesta muy importante para su futuro beneficio. Su primera idea había sido comunicarle los detalles por carta, pero los socios de la firma habían reflexionado y convenido que la necesaria decisión sería más fácil de tomar tras una entrevista personal con su padre y sus amigos. Así pues, dejando a un lado la pluma, se había encomendado de inmediato al ferrocarril.

Tras esta explicación preliminar, Frank procedió a describir la propuesta que le habían dirigido sus jefes con toda la apariencia externa de considerarla a la luz de una dificultad inaceptable.

Era evidente que la gran firma de la City había realizado exactamente el mismo descubrimiento con respecto a su oficinista que antes se vio obligado a aceptar el ingeniero en relación con su pupilo. El joven, como lo expresaron ellos cortésmente, estaba necesitado de algún estímulo especial que lo espabilara. Sus jefes (que actuaban así por sentirse obligados hacia el caballero que recomendara a Frank) habían estudiado la cuestión con detenimiento y habían decidido que el único uso prometedor que podían dar al señor Francis Clare era enviarlo inmediatamente a otro confín del globo.

Como consecuencia de esta decisión, se le proponía que entrara a formar parte de la oficina de sus agentes en la China, que permaneciera allí, familiarizándose plenamente, *in situ*, con el comercio del té y de la seda durante cinco años, y que regresara al expirar ese período a la casa central de Londres. Si hacía buen uso de sus oportunidades en la China, volvería siendo aún joven, capacitado para un puesto de confianza y un buen sueldo, y con plena justificación para esperar que en una fecha no muy distante la firma le ayudaría a emprender un negocio por su cuenta. Tales eran los nuevos proyectos que -adoptando la teoría del señor Clare- se imponían sobre el siempre reacio, incapaz e ingrato Frank. No había tiempo que perder. La respuesta definitiva debía estar en la oficina el «lunes, veinte», ya que debían mandar una carta a sus agentes en la China en el correo de ese mismo día, y Frank habría de seguir a la carta en la siguiente oportunidad o rehusar en favor de algún otro joven más emprendedor.

La reacción del señor Clare ante esta extraordinaria noticia fue en extremo sorprendente. La gloriosa perspectiva del destierro de su hijo a la China pareció trastornar su cerebro. El firme pedestal de su filosofía se desplomó a sus pies; los prejuicios sociales volvieron a hacer presa de su mente. ¡Aferró a Frank por el brazo y lo acompañó a Combe-Raven, en el asombroso papel de visitante de la casa!

- Aquí estoy con mi patán -anunció, antes de que la atónita familia pudiera pronunciar una sola palabra-. Escuchen su historia, todos ustedes. Por primera vez en la vida, me ha reconciliado con la anomalía de su existencia. -Frank narró la propuesta china por segunda vez con tono lastimero e intentó añadirle un rosario de objeciones y dificultades de su propia cosecha. Su padre lo detuvo en la primera palabra, señaló con gesto perentorio hacia el sudeste (de Somersetshire a la China) y dijo sin la menor vacilación-: ¡Ve! -El señor Vanstone, imaginando con gozo doradas visiones en el futuro de su joven amigo, se hizo eco de aquella decisión monosilábica de todo corazón. La señora Vanstone, la señorita Garth, e incluso Norah expresaron su conformidad. Frank quedó petrificado por una absoluta unanimidad de opinión que no había previsto y, por una vez en la vida, Magdalen se vio sin recursos para oponerse.

En lo tocante a los resultados prácticos, la asamblea familiar empezó y terminó con la opinión general de que Frank debía aceptar. Las facultades del señor Vanstone se hallaban tan alteradas por la súbita llegada del hijo y la inesperada visita del padre, y por la noticia que ambos traían consigo, que pidió un aplazamiento antes de que se estudiaran con detalle las necesarias disposiciones en relación con la partida de su joven amigo.

- ¿Y si lo consultamos con la almohada? -propuso-. Mañana tendremos la cabeza un poco más despejada, y aún habrá tiempo suficiente para resolver todas las dudas. -Se aceptó la sugerencia con prontitud y se aplazó toda acción hasta el día siguiente.

Ese día estaba destinado a resolver más dudas de las que el señor Vanstone imaginaba.

Por la mañana temprano, tras tomarse el té sola como de costumbre, la señorita Garth cogió su sombrilla y salió al jardín. Había dormido mal, y diez minutos al aire libre antes de que la familia se reuniera para el desayuno tal vez ayudaran a compensar, pensó, la pérdida de una noche de descanso.

Deambuló hasta el extremo más alejado de los arriates de flores, y luego regresó por otro sendero que conducía de vuelta a la casa pasando junto a una glorieta ornamental, desde cuyo rincón se dominaba el panorama de los campos. Un ligero ruido -parecido, pero distinto al chirrido de un ave- llegó a sus oídos cuando se acercaba a la glorieta. La rodeó hasta la entrada; se asomó al interior, y descubrió a Magdalen y a Frank sentados muy juntos. La horrorizada señorita Garth vio que el brazo de Magdalen rodeaba inequívocamente el cuello de Frank y, lo que era peor aún, la posición de su rostro en el momento del descubrimiento demostraba sin lugar a dudas que acababa de ofrecer a la víctima del comercio chino el primer y mejor consuelo que una mujer puede ofrecer a un hombre. En pocas palabras, acababa de dar un beso a Frank.

En vista de la emergencia con la que se enfrentaba, la señorita Garth comprendió instintivamente que no valía la pena malgastar saliva en frases de reproche corrientes.

- Supongo -comentó, dirigiéndose a Magdalen con la implacable seguridad de una señora de mediana edad, carente de recuerdos de besos propios para la ocasión-, supongo (sean cuales sean las excusas que tengas el descaro de sugerir) que no me negarás que mi deber me obliga a contarle a tu padre lo que acabo de ver.

- Le ahorraré la molestia -respondió Magdalen con serenidad-. Se lo contaré yo misma.

Tras estas palabras, se volvió para mirar a Frank, que permanecía de pie, completamente impotente, en un rincón de la glorieta.

- Verás lo que ocurre -dijo con una radiante sonrisa-. Y también usted -añadió al pasar junto a la institutriz para volver a la casa. Los ojos de la señorita Garth la siguieron con indignación, y Frank se escabulló por su lado aprovechando aquella oportunidad favorable.

Dadas las circunstancias, una mujer respetable sólo podía tomar un camino: estremecerse. La señorita Garth manifestó su protesta de esa forma y regresó a la casa.

Cuando terminó el desayuno y la mano del señor Vanstone descendió hacia su bolsillo en busca de su cigarrera, Magdalen se levantó, miró significativamente a la señorita Garth y siguió a su padre al vestíbulo.

- Papá -dijo-. Quiero hablar contigo esta mañana, en privado.

- ¡Ay!, ¡ay! -dijo el señor Vanstone-. ¿De qué, querida?

- De... -Magdalen vaciló, buscó una manera satisfactoria de expresarse y la halló-. De un asunto serio, papá.

El señor Vanstone cogió su sombrero de la mesa del vestíbulo, abrió los ojos en muda expresión de perplejidad, intentó asociar en su cabeza dos conceptos de tan extravagante disparidad como Magdalen y «asunto serio», fracasó y se dirigió resignadamente hacia el jardín.

Magdalen se cogió del brazo de su padre y caminó con él hasta un asiento sombreado a una distancia conveniente de la casa. Limpió de polvo el asiento con su elegante

delantal de seda antes de que su padre lo ocupara. El señor Vanstone no estaba acostumbrado a una atención tan extraordinaria como aquélla. Se sentó con aire más desconcertado aún que antes. Magdalen se instaló inmediatamente sobre sus rodillas y acomodó la cabeza en su hombro.

- ¿Peso mucho, papá? -preguntó.

- Sí, querida, pesas -dijo el señor Vanstone-, pero no demasiado para mí. Quédate así, si quieres. ¿Bien? ¿Y cuál puede ser ese asunto tan serio?

- Empieza con una pregunta.

- ¿Ah, sí? Eso no me sorprende. Los asuntos serios, con las personas de vuestro sexo, querida mía, siempre empiezan con preguntas. Dime.

- ¡Papá! ¿Piensas darme permiso para casarme algún día?

El señor Vanstone abrió los ojos más y más. La pregunta, utilizando su propia expresión, lo dejó de piedra.

- ¡Ése sí que es un asunto serio! -dijo-. ¡Vaya, Magdalen!, ¿qué está tramando ahora esa cabeza de chorlito que tienes?

- No lo sé exactamente, papá. ¿Quieres contestar a mi pregunta?

- Lo haré si puedo, querida; me has dejado de piedra. Bueno, no lo sé. Sí, supongo que tendré que darte permiso para casarte, uno de estos días, si podemos encontrar un buen marido para ti. ¡Qué acalorada estás! Levanta la cara y deja que el aire te refresque. ¿No? Bueno, como quieras. Si hablar de asuntos serios significa que te haga cosquillas en la mejilla con mi patilla, no tengo nada que oponer. Sigue, querida. ¿Cuál es la siguiente pregunta? ¡Al grano!

Magdalen era demasiado mujer para hacer algo por el estilo. Empezó dando un rodeo y calculó la distancia hasta su objetivo con la precisión de la anchura de un cabello.

- Ayer nos quedamos todos muy sorprendidos, ¿verdad, papá? Frank ha tenido una suerte increíble, ¿verdad?

- Es el tipo con más suerte con que me he tropezado -dijo el señor Vanstone-. Pero ¿qué tiene eso que ver con ese asunto tuyo? Tal vez tú sepas de lo que hablas, Magdalen. ¡Que me aspen si lo sé yo!

Magdalen se acercó un poco más.

- Supongo que hará fortuna en la China -dijo-. Está muy lejos, ¿no es así? ¿Te diste cuenta, papá, de que Frank parecía muy triste y abatido ayer?

- Me sorprendió tanto la noticia -dijo el señor Vanstone-, y me quedé tan atónito por la visión de la afilada nariz del viejo Clare en mi casa, que no me fijé demasiado. Ahora que me lo recuerdas, sí. No creo que Frank aceptara gustoso su buena suerte; no, en absoluto.

- ¿No te extraña, papá?

- Sí, querida, bastante.

- ¿No crees que es duro que a uno lo envíen lejos durante cinco años para hacer fortuna entre salvajes abominables, y perder de vista a los amigos durante todo ese tiempo? ¿No crees que Frank nos echará terriblemente de menos? ¿No lo crees, papá? ¿No te parece?

- ¡Despacio, Magdalen! Soy demasiado viejo para que bromees ahogándome con esos brazos tan largos que tienes. Tienes razón, cariño. No hay nada en este mundo que no tenga sus inconvenientes. Frank echará de menos a sus amigos de Inglaterra, qué duda

cabe.

- A ti siempre te ha gustado Frank. Y a Frank siempre le has gustado tú.

- Sí, sí; es un buen muchacho; un muchacho bueno y tranquilo. Frank y yo siempre nos hemos llevado bien.

- Habéis sido como padre e hijo, ¿no es cierto?

- Cierto es, querida.

- Quizá, cuando se haya ido, pienses que será más duro para él de lo que crees ahora, ¿no?

- Es probable, Magdalen; no digo que no.

- Tal vez desearías entonces que se hubiera quedado en Inglaterra, ¿no crees? ¿Por qué no habría de quedarse en Inglaterra y hacer fortuna aquí igual que en la China?

- ¡Querida mía!, en Inglaterra no tiene perspectivas. Ojalá las tuviera, por su propio bien. Deseo lo mejor para el muchacho de todo corazón.

- ¿Puedo desearle yo también lo mejor, de todo corazón?

- Desde luego, cariño, es tu viejo compañero de juegos, ¿por qué no? ¿Qué ocurre? Dios me bendiga, ¿por qué llora esta niña ahora? Cualquiera diría que van a deportar a Frank de por vida. ¡No seas boba! Sabes tan bien como yo que se va a la China para hacer fortuna.

- No quiere hacer fortuna; podría hacer algo mucho mejor.

- ¡Y un cuerno podría! ¿Cómo, si puede saberse?

- Me da miedo decírtelo. Tengo miedo de que te rías de mí. ¿Me prometes que no te reirás de mí?

- Cualquier cosa por complacerte, querida. Sí, lo prometo. ¡Bueno, suéltalo! ¿Cómo podría irle mejor a Frank?

- Podría casarse conmigo.

Si el panorama estival que se extendía entonces ante los ojos del señor Vanstone se hubiera metamorfoseado repentinamente en un triste paisaje invernal -si los árboles hubieran perdido todas sus hojas y los verdes campos se hubieran vuelto blancos por la nieve en un instante-, difícilmente su rostro habría expresado un asombro mayor que el que mostraba cuando la voz titubeante de su hija pronunció esas tres últimas palabras. Intentó mirarla, pero ella le negó esa posibilidad con firmeza, manteniendo el rostro oculto en su hombro. ¿Hablaba en serio? La mejilla del señor Vanstone, húmeda aún por las lágrimas de Magdalen, respondió por ella. Se produjo una larga pausa; Magdalen aguardó, con desacostumbrada paciencia, a que él hablara. Su padre salió de su asombro y dijo tan sólo estas palabras:

- Me sorprendes, Magdalen; me sorprendes más de lo que puedo expresar.

Oyendo el tono alterado de su voz -el tono de una tranquila seriedad paternal-, Magdalen lo abrazó con más fuerza que antes.

- ¿Te he decepcionado, papá? -preguntó débilmente-. ¡No me digas que te he decepcionado! ¿A quién iba a contarle mi secreto sino a ti? No dejes que se vaya, ¡no!, ¡no! Le romperás el corazón. Tiene miedo de decírselo a su padre; incluso teme que tú te enojes con él. Nadie hablará por nosotros, excepto..., excepto yo. ¡Oh, no dejes que se vaya! ¡No, por su propio bien, no! -susurró sus siguientes palabras en un beso-. ¡Por mi propio bien, no!

El rostro afable de su padre se ensombreció; el señor Vanstone suspiró y palmeó su rubia cabeza con cariño.

- Silencio, cariño -dijo, casi en un susurro-, ¡silencio! -Poco sospechaba ella que con cada palabra y cada acción suya, los ojos de su padre se abrían a una nueva revelación. Magdalen había hecho de él su compañero de juegos adulto, desde la infancia hasta ese mismo día. Había retozado con él cuando llevaba vestidos cortos y también cuando los cambió por otros largos. El señor Vanstone no había estado nunca separado de ella el tiempo suficiente para darse cuenta de los cambios externos que se habían producido en su hija. Su cándida experiencia paterna le había enseñado que era más alta en los últimos años, y poco más. Y en ese momento, en un intenso instante, la convicción de que era una mujer barrió su pensamiento. Lo notaba en el movimiento de su seno apretado contra él; en la excitación nerviosa de los brazos enlazados en torno a su cuello. ¡La Magdalen de su inocente experiencia, una mujer, con el corazón preso ya de la pasión dominante en las de su sexo!

- ¿Has pensado bien en ello, querida? -preguntó en cuanto pudo hablar con serenidad-. ¿Estás segura...?

Magdalen respondió a la pregunta antes de que pudiera formularla.

- ¿Segura de amarle? -dijo-. ¡Oh, qué palabras pueden afirmarlo tal como yo quisiera! ¡Le amo...! -Su voz se quebró suavemente, y su respuesta terminó en un suspiro.

- Eres muy joven. Tú y Frank, cariño, sois muy jóvenes.

Magdalen alzó la cabeza del hombro de su padre por primera vez. La idea y su expresión surgieron de ella al mismo tiempo.

- ¿Somos mucho más jóvenes de lo que erais mamá y tú? -preguntó, con una sonrisa entre las lágrimas.

Intentó volver a colocar la cabeza en la antigua posición, pero mientras hablaba su padre la cogió por la cintura -la obligó, antes de que ella se diera cuenta, a mirarlo a la cara-, y le dio un beso en un súbito arranque de cariño, que hizo afluir de nuevo abundantes lágrimas a los ojos de Magdalen.

- No mucho, hija mía -dijo, en voz baja y temblorosa-, no mucho más jóvenes de lo que éramos tu madre y yo. -La apartó de sí y se levantó del asiento, y volvió la cara rápidamente-. Espera aquí y sosiégate; yo iré dentro y hablaré con tu madre. -Su voz temblaba al decir estas palabras de despedida, y la dejó sin volverse a mirarla una sola vez.

Magdalen aguardó; aguardó hasta cansarse, y él no volvía. Por fin, su ansiedad creciente la impulsó a entrar también en la casa. Su pecho palpitaba lleno de una turbación desconocida al acercarse vacilante a la puerta. Jamás había visto las profundidades de la sencilla naturaleza de su padre alteradas hasta el punto en que las había alterado su confesión. Casi temía su siguiente encuentro con él. Paseó en silencio de un lado a otro del vestíbulo con un aturdimiento que no sabía explicar, con el terror de ser descubierta y de que su hermana o la señorita Garth le dirigieran la palabra, lo que originó en ella una susceptibilidad nerviosa a los más leves ruidos de la casa. La puerta de la salita se abrió mientras se hallaba de espaldas a ella. Dio un violento respingo cuando miró hacia atrás y vio a su padre en el vestíbulo; su corazón latió cada vez más deprisa y notó que se ponía pálida. Una segunda mirada a su padre, que se acercaba, la tranquilizó. El señor Vanstone volvía a mostrarse sereno, pero no tan alegre como de costumbre. Magdalen se fijó en que avanzaba y se dirigía a ella con una amabilidad indulgente, que era más bien la actitud que adoptaba con su madre que la que solía adoptar con su hija menor.

- Entra, cariño -dijo el señor Vanstone, abriéndole la puerta que acababa de cerrar-. Cuéntale a tu madre lo que acabas de contarme a mí, y más, si más tienes que decir. Está mejor preparada de lo que lo estaba yo. Nos tomaremos el día de hoy para reflexionar, Magdalen, y mañana sabrás, y Frank sabrá, lo que decidamos.

Los ojos de Magdalen se animaron al mirar el rostro de su padre y ver en él la decisión ya tomada, con la doble perspicacia de su feminidad y su amor. Feliz, y hermosa en su felicidad, se llevó la mano de su padre a los labios y entró sin vacilar en la salita. Allí las palabras de su padre le habían allanado el camino; allí la conmoción primera de la sorpresa había pasado ya, y sólo quedaba el placer de sentirla. Su madre había tenido su edad; comprendería cuan grande era su afecto por Frank. Así imaginaba Magdalen la entrevista, y -salvo por el hecho de que la señora Vanstone pareció recibirla con un extraño comedimiento- imaginaba bien. Al cabo de un rato, las preguntas de la madre surgieron cada vez más espontáneas de la dulce e inolvidable experiencia de su corazón maternal, reviviendo su juventud de amor y de esperanza en las réplicas de Magdalen.

A la mañana siguiente, la trascendental decisión fue anunciada. El señor Vanstone llevó a Magdalen a la habitación de su esposa y allí le expuso el resultado de la deliberación del día anterior y de la reflexión subsiguiente durante la noche. Habló con gran afabilidad y dominio de sí mismo, pero con menos palabras y más serias que de costumbre, y sostuvo la mano de su esposa con ternura durante toda la entrevista.

Comunicó a Magdalen que ni su madre ni él hallaban motivo para censurar el cariño que sentía por Frank. Había sido, en parte quizá, la consecuencia natural de una familiaridad infantil entre ellos, y en parte también, el resultado de una mayor intimidad que la función teatral había producido inevitablemente. Al mismo tiempo, era su deber de padres poner a prueba ese cariño convenientemente y por ambas partes; por el bien de Magdalen, porque su felicidad futura era lo que más les importaba; por el bien de Frank, porque estaban obligados a darle la oportunidad de mostrarse digno de la confianza depositada en él. Ambos eran conscientes de sentir una gran predilección por Frank. La excéntrica conducta del señor Clare había convertido al muchacho en objeto de su compasión y cuidados desde la infancia. Él (y sus hermanos menores) habían llenado casi el lugar de los hijos que ellos habían perdido. Aunque creían firmemente que su buena opinión era fundamentada, aun así, en bien de la felicidad de su hija, era necesario poner a prueba esa opinión fijando ciertas condiciones e interponiendo un año de plazo entre el posible matrimonio y el momento presente.

Durante ese año, Frank habría de permanecer en la oficina de Londres; sus jefes serían informados de que ciertas circunstancias familiares le impedían aceptar su oferta de empleo en la China. Frank debería considerar esta concesión como el reconocimiento de la relación que existía entre Magdalen y él, sólo en ciertos aspectos. Si durante el año de prueba no justificaba la confianza que recibía -una confianza que había inducido al señor Vanstone a aceptar sin reservas toda la responsabilidad sobre sus perspectivas futuras-, los planes de matrimonio habrían de darse por anulados desde ese momento. Si, por otro lado, el resultado que el señor Vanstone esperaba con confianza se producía realmente -si el año de prueba demostraba que Frank tenía derecho a la más preciada carga que podía depositarse en sus manos-, sólo entonces la propia Magdalen habría de recompensarle con todo lo que una mujer puede entregar, y el futuro que los jefes de Frank le habían presentado como resultado de una estancia de cinco años en la China se realizaría en un solo año gracias a la dote de su joven esposa.

Mientras su padre describía así el futuro, Magdalen no pudo contener la gratitud que pugnaba por manifestarse en ella. Estaba profundamente conmovida; habló desde lo más hondo de su corazón. El señor Vanstone aguardó hasta que su mujer y su hija recobraron la calma, y luego añadió las últimas explicaciones que le quedaban por dar.

- Supongo que comprendes, cariño -dijo-, que no espero que Frank viva ociosamente de la fortuna de su mujer. Mi plan es que siga aprovechando el interés que muestran por él sus actuales jefes. Gracias a su experiencia en los negocios de la City, pronto pondrán a su disposición la posibilidad de asociarse ventajosamente, y tú aportarás el dinero de inmediato. Yo limitaré la suma, querida, a la mitad de tu fortuna; y la otra mitad haré que te la asignen a ti. Todos estaremos vivos y sanos, espero -miró cariñosamente a su esposa al decir estas palabras-, todos vivos y sanos a final de año. Pero, aunque me haya ido, Magdalen, nada habrá cambiado. Mi testamento, redactado mucho antes de que pensara siquiera en tener un yerno, divide mi fortuna en dos partes iguales. Una parte la heredará tu madre, y la otra se dividirá a partes iguales entre mis hijas. Recibirás tu parte el día de tu boda (y Norah recibirá la suya cuando se case) de mi propia mano, si

vivo, y por testamento, si muero. ¡Vamos, vamos, nada de caras tristes! -dijo, recuperando momentáneamente su cotidiano buen humor-. Tu madre y yo tenemos intención de vivir para ver a Frank convertido en un gran comerciante. Te dejo a ti, querida, la tarea de comunicar al hijo nuestros nuevos proyectos, mientras yo me acerco a su casa…

Se interrumpió, frunció un poco el entrecejo y miró vacilante a la señora Vanstone.

- ¿Qué has de hacer en su casa, papá? -preguntó Magdalen, tras haber esperado en vano a que terminara la frase espontáneamente.

- He de consultar con el padre de Frank -contestó-. No debemos olvidar que aún nos falta el consentimiento del señor Clare para zanjar esta cuestión. Y dado que el tiempo apremia y que no sabemos qué dificultades pueda plantear, cuanto antes vaya a verlo mejor.

Dio esta respuesta en voz baja y con el tono alterado, y se levantó de su silla con una actitud entre reticente y resignada, que Magdalen observó con secreta alarma.

Miró inquisitivamente a su madre. Al parecer, también a la señora Vanstone le había alarmado aquel cambio. Parecía preocupada y nerviosa; volvió el rostro sobre el almohadón del sofá; lo volvió de repente, como si sintiera algún dolor.

- ¿No te encuentras bien, mamá? -preguntó Magdalen.

- Perfectamente, cariño -respondió la señora Vanstone, seca y sucinta, sin girar la cara-. Déjame sola un rato. Sólo necesito descansar.

Magdalen salió con su padre.

- ¡Papá! -susurró con inquietud mientras bajaban por las escaleras-. Tú no creerás que el señor Clare va a decir que no.

- No puedo asegurártelo -respondió el señor Vanstone-. Espero que diga que sí.

- No hay ninguna razón para que diga lo contrario, ¿verdad?

Formuló la pregunta débilmente, mientras él iba en busca de su bastón y su sombrero, sin que pareciera oírla. Con la duda de si debía repetir o no la pregunta, le acompañó hasta el jardín de camino hacia la casa del señor Clare. Allí él la detuvo y la envió de vuelta a casa.

- Llevas la cabeza al descubierto, querida -dijo-. Si quieres quedarte en el jardín, no olvides que hace mucho sol; no salgas sin sombrero.

Él siguió caminando hacia la casa del señor Clare.

Magdalen aguardó unos instantes y miró a su padre. Echó de menos el acostumbrado movimiento de su bastón; vio a su pequeño terrier escocés, que había salido corriendo detrás de él, ladrando y haciendo cabriolas a su alrededor sin conseguir llamar su atención. Su padre estaba decaído, extrañamente decaído. ¿Por qué sería?

CAPÍTULO X

De regreso a la casa, Magdalen notó de repente que le tocaban el hombro por detrás cuando atravesaba el vestíbulo. Dio media vuelta y se encontró con su hermana. Antes de que pudiera hacerle pregunta alguna, una alterada Norah le dirigía estas palabras:

- Te pido perdón; te pido que me perdones.

Magdalen miró a su hermana con asombro. Todo recuerdo de las duras palabras que habían intercambiado en la arboleda había sido borrado por los nuevos intereses que la absorbían; tan completamente borrados como si la airada entrevista no se hubiera producido jamás.

- ¡Perdonarte! -repitió, atónita-. ¿Por qué?

- Me he enterado de tus nuevos planes -prosiguió Norah, hablando con una sumisión mecánica que parecía casi descortés-. Quería hacer las paces contigo; quería decirte que siento lo ocurrido. ¿Podrás olvidarlo? ¿Podrás olvidar y perdonar lo que ocurrió en la arboleda? -Intentó continuar, pero su inveterada reserva (o quizá una obstinada confianza en sus propias opiniones) la hizo callar tras esas últimas palabras. Su rostro se ensombreció de repente. Antes de que su hermana pudiera responder, se dio la vuelta bruscamente y corrió escaleras arriba.

La puerta de la biblioteca se abrió antes de que Magdalen pudiera seguir a su hermana y la señorita Garth se acercó a ella con el propósito de manifestar los sentimientos más adecuados para la ocasión.

No eran los sentimientos maquinalmente sumisos que Magdalen acababa de oír. Norah había combatido la enraizada desconfianza que le inspiraba Frank por respeto a la decisión irrefutable de sus padres en su favor, y había reprimido la franca expresión de su antipatía aunque el sentimiento en sí permaneciera incólume. La señorita Garth no hizo tal concesión a los dueños de la casa. Hasta entonces había ocupado una posición de gran autoridad en todos los asuntos familiares, y se negaba rotundamente a bajarse del pedestal por respeto a cambio alguno en las circunstancias familiares, por asombroso o inesperado que fuera ese cambio.

- Te ruego que aceptes mis felicitaciones -dijo, rebosando toda ella de objeciones implícitas contra Frank-; mis felicitaciones y mis disculpas. Cuando te sorprendí besando al señor Francis Clare en la glorieta, no tenía la menor idea de que vuestras actividades estuvieran en consonancia con las intenciones de tus padres. No voy a dar mi opinión al respecto. Me limito a lamentar mi aparición accidental en el papel de obstáculo en el curso del verdadero amor, que parece fluir gratamente en las glorietas pese a lo que Shakespeare pueda aducir en sentido contrario. En el futuro, ten la amabilidad de considerarme un obstáculo superado. ¡Que seas muy feliz! -Los labios de la señorita Garth se cerraron como una trampa con esta última frase y sus ojos contemplaron el futuro del matrimonio llenos de ominosas profecías.

Si las preocupaciones de Magdalen no hubieran sido demasiado serias para permitir el libre uso de su lengua, como era su costumbre, habría tenido a punto la adecuada réplica satírica. En aquel momento, la señorita Garth sólo consiguió irritarla.

- ¡Bah! -exclamó, y corrió escaleras arriba en dirección al dormitorio de su hermana.

Llamó a la puerta y no obtuvo respuesta. Probó a abrirla, y se resistió. La hosca e intratable Norah se había encerrado en su cuarto.

En otras circunstancias, Magdalen no se hubiera limitado a llamar a la puerta; hubiera llamado a su hermana en voz cada vez más alta hasta molestar a toda la casa y conseguir su objetivo. Pero las dudas y miedos de la mañana la habían desanimado ya. Bajó de nuevo despacio y cogió su sombrero del velador del vestíbulo.

- Me ha dicho que me ponga el sombrero -dijo para sí, con una blanda docilidad filial que era completamente ajena a su carácter.

Salió al jardín por el lado de la arboleda y aguardó allí el regreso de su padre. Transcurrió media hora, luego cuarenta minutos, y finalmente le llegó su voz desde la lejanía de los árboles.

- ¡Ven aquí! -le oyó gritar al perro. Magdalen palideció.

- ¡Está enfadado con *Snap*! -exclamó en un susurro. En aquel momento apareció su padre, caminando deprisa, con la cabeza gacha y *Snap* pegado a sus talones, caído en desgracia. Mientras Magdalen observaba estos signos funestos, el súbito aumento de su alarma reavivó su energía natural y la desesperación la impulsó a enterarse de lo peor cuanto antes.

Caminó resueltamente al encuentro de su padre.

- La respuesta está escrita en tu cara -dijo débilmente-. El señor Clare ha sido tan cruel como siempre. ¿Ha dicho que no el señor Clare?

El señor Vanstone se volvió hacia ella con una repentina severidad, tan desconocida hasta la fecha que Magdalen dio un respingo de puro terror.

- ¡Magdalen! -dijo-; cuando vuelvas a hablar de mi viejo amigo y vecino, que no se te olvide esto: el señor Clare acaba de hacerme un favor que recordaré con agradecimiento el resto de mi vida. -El señor Vanstone se detuvo de pronto tras pronunciar estas extraordinarias palabras. Viendo que había sobresaltado a su hija, su natural bondad le impulsó de inmediato a suavizar el reproche y poner fin a la incertidumbre que a todas luces atormentaba a Magdalen-. Dame un beso, cariño -prosiguió-, y a cambio te diré que el señor Clare ha dado su consentimiento.

Magdalen quiso darle las gracias, pero el súbito placer del alivio fue demasiado para ella. Sólo pudo rodearle el cuello en silencio. Él notó que temblaba de pies a cabeza y dijo unas cuantas palabras para calmarla. Al oír el tono alterado de la voz de su amo, el sumiso rabo de *Snap* surgió con fuerza de entre sus patas y sus pulmones pusieron modestamente a prueba su situación con un breve ladrido experimental. Aquel modo extrañamente apropiado que tuvo el perro de reafirmarse en su antigua posición fue, entre todos, el paréntesis que más convenía para que Magdalen volviera a ser la de antes. Alzó en brazos al lanudo y menudo terrier y acto seguido lo besó.

- ¡Cielito mío! -exclamó-. ¡Estás casi tan contento como yo! -Se volvió de nuevo hacia su padre con una mirada de cariñoso reproche-. Me habías asustado, papá -dijo-. Estabas tan raro...

- Volveré a estar bien mañana, querida. Hoy estoy un poco trastornado...

- No será por mi causa...

- No, no.

- ¿Es por algo que has oído en casa del señor Clare?

- Sí; nada por lo que debas alarmarte; nada que no se pueda haber disipado mañana. Ahora deja que me vaya, querida, tengo que escribir una carta y quiero hablar con tu madre.

Se separó de ella para entrar en la mansión. Magdalen permaneció un rato en el jardín para embeberse de toda la felicidad de sus nuevas sensaciones; luego se dirigió a la arboleda para disfrutar del placer aún mayor de transmitirlas. El perro la siguió. Magdalen silbó y dio unas palmadas.

- ¡Encuéntralo! -dijo con la mirada radiante-. ¡Encuentra a Frank! -*Snap* se adentró correteando en la arboleda con un gruñido sanguinario. ¿Había malinterpretado quizá a

su joven ama y se consideraba su emisario en la búsqueda de una rata?

Mientras tanto el señor Vanstone entraba en la casa. Se encontró con su esposa, que descendía lentamente por la escalinata y se acercó para ofrecerle el brazo.

- ¿Cómo ha terminado todo? -preguntó con inquietud, mientras él la conducía hasta el sofá.

- Felizmente, tal como esperábamos -respondió su marido-. Mi viejo amigo ha hecho justicia a la opinión que tenía de él.

- ¡Gracias a Dios! -dijo la señora Vanstone con fervor-. ¿Te ha sido muy difícil, cariño? -preguntó mientras su marido le arreglaba los cojines del sofá-. ¿Te ha dolido tanto como yo temía?

- Tenía un deber que cumplir, querida, y así lo he hecho.

Tras responder de esta guisa, vaciló. Aparentemente tenía algo más que decir; algo, quizá, sobre el desasosiego pasajero que era consecuencia de su entrevista con el señor Clare y que las preguntas de Magdalen le habían obligado a confesar. Una mirada a su esposa resolvió sus dudas en sentido negativo. Se limitó a preguntarle si estaba cómoda y luego dio media vuelta para abandonar la estancia.

- ¿Tienes que irte? -preguntó ella.

- He de escribir una carta, querida.

- ¿Algo sobre Frank?

- No, ya habrá tiempo para eso mañana. Una carta al señor Pendril. Quiero que venga inmediatamente.

- Por negocios, supongo.

- Sí, querida, negocios.

El señor Vanstone salió y se encerró en la pequeña habitación junto a la puerta principal que llamaba su estudio. Él, que por naturaleza difería siempre al máximo la redacción de sus cartas, manifestó en aquel momento la incongruencia de abrir el secreter y sacar la pluma sin un momento de dilación. Se extendió a lo largo de tres páginas de papel de cartas; escribió con una soltura de expresión y una rapidez en la mano que raras veces caracterizaban su proceder cuando se ocupaba de la correspondencia ordinaria. Escribió la dirección como sigue: «Entrega inmediata: Señor William Pendril, Serle Street, Lincoln's Inn, Londres», luego apartó la epístola lejos de sí y se sentó en la mesa, trazando líneas sobre el papel secante con la pluma, sumido en meditaciones.

«No -se dijo-, nada más puedo hacer hasta que llegue Pendril.» Se levantó; su rostro se iluminó cuando pegó el sello en el sobre. La redacción de la carta le había aliviado considerablemente; su porte lo demostraba cuando salió del estudio.

En el umbral de la puerta halló a Norah y a la señorita Garth que se disponían a salir juntas de paseo.

- ¿En qué dirección vais? -preguntó-. ¿Pasaréis cerca de la oficina de correos? Quiero que entregues esta carta por mí, Norah. Es muy importante; tan importante que no quiero confiársela a Thomas como de costumbre.

Norah se hizo cargo de la carta sin tardanza.

- Si te fijas, querida -continuó su padre-, verás que he escrito al señor Pendril. Espero que esté aquí mañana por la tarde. ¿Querrá usted dar las instrucciones necesarias, señorita Garth? El señor Pendril dormirá aquí mañana por la noche y se quedará hasta el domingo. ¡Espere un momento! Hoy es viernes. ¿No es cierto que tenía un compromiso el sábado por la tarde? -Consultó su libreta y leyó una de las entradas con

expresión de fastidio-. Molino de Grailsea, tres en punto, sábado. Justo la hora en que llegará Pendril, y he de estar en casa para verle. ¿Cómo voy a arreglarlo? El lunes será demasiado tarde para el asunto de Grailsea. Iré hoy y con un poco de suerte pillaré al molinero a la hora de comer. -Miró el reloj-. No me da tiempo a ir en carruaje; tendré que coger el tren. Si salgo ahora mismo encontraré el tren que vuelve de Londres en la estación y me iré en él hasta Grailsea. Ocúpate de la carta, Norah. Habré vuelto para la cena; si el tren de regreso no me va bien, pediré prestada una calesa.

Cogía su sombrero cuando Magdalen apareció en la puerta tras su entrevista con Frank. La premura de movimientos de su padre atrajo su atención y le preguntó adonde iba.

- A Grailsea -respondió el señor Vanstone-. Tu asunto, Magdalen, se ha interpuesto en el mío, y el mío ha de cederle el paso.

Pronunció estas palabras de despedida con sus antiguas maneras campechanas e inició su marcha con el característico movimiento de su fiel bastón.

- ¡Mi asunto! -dijo Magdalen-. Creía que mi asunto estaba zanjado.

La señorita Garth señaló con gesto significativo la carta que sostenía Norah.

- Tu asunto, sin la menor duda -dijo-. El señor Pendril vendrá mañana, y el señor Vanstone parece singularmente impaciente por que llegue. ¡Ya tenemos aquí a la ley y los problemas que comporta! Las institutrices que se asoman a las glorietas no son el único obstáculo en el curso del verdadero amor; el papeleo es a veces un obstáculo. Espero que encuentres el papel tan flexible como yo; espero que todo salga bien. ¡Vamos, Norah!

La segunda pulla de la señorita Garth resultó tan inofensiva como la primera. Magdalen había regresado a casa algo disgustada, tras haber visto interrumpida su entrevista con Frank por culpa de un mensajero del señor Clare, a quien habían encargado llamar al hijo a la presencia del padre. Aunque se había acordado durante la conversación privada entre el señor Vanstone y el señor Clare que las cuestiones debatidas esa mañana no se comunicarían a los hijos hasta que concluyera el año de prueba -y aunque en tales circunstancias el señor Clare no tenía nada que decir a Frank que Magdalen no pudiera transmitirle de un modo mucho más agradable-, no por ello estaba menos resuelto el filósofo a informar personalmente a su hijo sobre la concesión paterna que lo salvaba del exilio chino. El resultado era la súbita orden de que se presentara en casa, cosa que sobresaltó a Magdalen, pero que no pareció tomar a Frank por sorpresa. Su experiencia filial desveló el misterio de los motivos del señor Clare con total sencillez.

- Cuando mi padre está de buen humor -dijo malhumoradamente-, se complace avasallándome por mi buena suerte. Ese mensaje significa que quiere avasallarme ahora.

- No vayas -sugirió Magdalen.

- He de hacerlo -replicó Frank-. De lo contrario no me dejará en paz. Está cebado y cargado y tiene la intención de explotar. Explotó una vez, cuando me aceptó el ingeniero; explotó una segunda vez, cuando me aceptó la oficina de la City, y va a explotar la tercera vez, ahora que tú me has aceptado. De no ser por ti, desearía no haber nacido. Sí, tu padre ha sido bueno conmigo, lo sé, y habría tenido que irme a la China de no ser por él. Estoy seguro de que he de estarle muy agradecido. Por supuesto, no teníamos derecho a esperar nada más; aun así, es descorazonador que nos hagan aguardar un año, ¿verdad?

Magdalen le cerró la boca mediante un procedimiento sumarísimo al que incluso Frank se sometió con agrado. No obstante, no olvidó interpretar su descontento a la luz más favorable. «¡Cuánto me quiere! -pensó-. Un año de espera es todo un suplicio para él.» Magdalen regresó a casa lamentando secretamente no haber oído más quejas halagadoras de Frank. La sátira sutil de la señorita Garth, dirigida a ella cuando se hallaba en semejante estado de ánimo, fue malgastar saliva. ¿Qué le importaba a ella la sátira? ¿Qué otra cosa importa a la juventud y al amor salvo ellos mismos? Esta vez,

Magdalen ni siquiera soltó un «¡Bah!». Dejó a un lado su sombrero en sereno silencio y se encaminó lánguidamente hacia la salita para hacer compañía a su madre. Durante la comida, se alimentó de terribles presagios sobre una pelea entre Frank y su padre, con alguna interrupción accidental en forma de pollo frío y pastelillos de queso. Dedicó media hora al piano y tocó, en ese tiempo, selecciones de las canciones de Mendelssohn, las mazurcas de Chopin, las óperas de Verdi y las sonatas de Mozart; las cuales se combinaron en aquella ocasión para producir una única obra inmortal titulada «Frank». Cerró el piano y subió a su estancia para pasar las horas soñando placenteramente con escenas de su futuro matrimonio. Se cerraron los postigos verdes, se colocó el butacón frente al espejo, se llamó a la doncella, como de costumbre, y el peine ayudó a la señorita en la meditación a través de sus cabellos, hasta que el calor y la pereza aunaron sus efectos narcóticos y Magdalen cayó en brazos de Morfeo.

Pasaban de las tres cuando se despertó. Al bajar de nuevo, encontró a su madre, a Norah y a la señorita Garth sentadas juntas, disfrutando de la sombra y el fresco bajo el porche de la fachada de la casa.

Norah tenía el horario de trenes en la mano. Habían estado comentando las posibilidades de que el señor Vanstone cogiera el tren de vuelta y llegara pronto. Este tema las había llevado a continuación al asunto que debía despachar en Grailsea: una obra de caridad, como siempre, en favor del molinero, que era su antiguo sirviente en la granja, y que se veía apremiado por serias dificultades pecuniarias. De ahí pasaron sin darse cuenta a un tema que se repetía a menudo entre ellas y no se agotaba nunca: las alabanzas al propio señor Vanstone. Cada una tenía una experiencia que relatar sobre su naturaleza sencilla y liberal. La conversación parecía resultar dolorosa para la señora Vanstone. El momento de la verdad estaba demasiado cerca para no sentirse nerviosa y sensible con respecto al asunto que ocupaba siempre el lugar predominante en su corazón. Sus ojos se llenaron de lágrimas cuando Magdalen se unió al pequeño grupo bajo el porche; tembló su frágil mano cuando indicó a su hija menor que ocupara la silla vacante a su lado.

- Hablábamos de tu padre -dijo en voz baja-. Oh, querida, ojalá tu vida de casada fuera tan feliz como... -Se le quebró la voz; rápidamente se llevó el pañuelo a la cara y apoyó la cabeza en el hombro de Magdalen. Norah lanzó una mirada suplicante a la señorita Garth, que recondujo de inmediato la conversación al tema más trivial del regreso del señor Vanstone.

- Nos preguntábamos -dijo, con una significativa mirada a Magdalen-, si tu padre abandonará Grailsea a tiempo para coger el tren, o si lo perderá y se verá obligado a volver en calesa. ¿Qué opinas tú?

- Yo creo que papá perderá el tren -contestó Magdalen, captando la insinuación de la señorita Garth con la acostumbrada rapidez-. Lo último a lo que atenderá en Grailsea será el asunto que lo ha llevado hasta allí. Siempre que tiene que hacer algo, lo aplaza hasta el último momento, ¿no es cierto, mamá?

La pregunta reanimó a su madre tal y como Magdalen pretendía.

- No cuando se trata de una obra caritativa -dijo la señora Vanstone-. Ha ido a ayudar al molinero en un momento de acuciante necesidad

- ¿Y no sabes ya lo que hará? -insistió Magdalen-. Jugará con los hijos del molinero, cotilleará con la madre y charlará con el padre. En el último momento, cuando le queden cinco minutos para coger el tren, dirá: «Vamos a la oficina a echar un vistazo a los libros de cuentas». Hallará los libros terriblemente complicados; sugerirá que se soliciten los servicios de un contable y arreglará el problema al punto, prestando el dinero mientras tanto; volverá al trote cómodamente en la calesa del molinero y nos contará lo agradable que estaban los caminos en el frescor de la noche.

La pequeña caracterización esbozada por sus palabras era demasiado parecida al

natural para que no lo reconocieran. La señora Vanstone mostró su aprobación con una sonrisa.

- Cuando vuelva tu padre -dijo-, pondremos a prueba tu relato sobre su proceder. Creo -continuó, levantándose lánguidamente de la silla- que será mejor que me meta en casa y descanse en el sofá hasta que vuelva.

El pequeño grupo del porche se separó. Magdalen se alejó hacia el jardín en busca de Frank para que le relatara la entrevista con su padre. Las otras tres señoras entraron juntas en la casa. Cuando la señora Vanstone estuvo cómodamente instalada en el sofá, Norah y la señorita Garth la dejaron reposando y se retiraron a la biblioteca para echar una ojeada al último paquete de libros procedente de Londres.

Era un apacible día de estío sin nubes. Una ligera brisa del oeste atemperaba el calor; las voces de los braceros que trabajaban en un campo cercano llegaban alegremente hasta la casa; el reloj de la iglesia de la aldea dio los cuartos, que llegaron flotando en el viento con un repicar más limpio y una melodía más sonora de lo habitual. Por las ventanas abiertas se filtraron los dulces olores de la campiña y del jardín, llenando la casa de su fragancia, y las aves de la pajarera que Norah tenía arriba lanzaron al sol trinos de felicidad exultante.

El reloj de la iglesia daba las cuatro y cuarto cuando se abrió la puerta de la salita y la señora Vanstone atravesó sola el vestíbulo. En vano había intentado sosegarse. Estaba demasiado agitada para descansar y para dormir. Por un momento, dirigió sus pasos hacia el porche, luego dio media vuelta y miró alrededor sin saber adonde ir ni qué hacer. Mientras aún dudaba, la puerta medio abierta del estudio de su marido atrajo su atención. La estancia parecía hallarse en un estado de lamentable desorden. Los cajones estaban abiertos; chaquetas y sombreros, libros de cuentas y papeles, pipas y cañas de pescar se mezclaban por todas partes en un batiburrillo. Entró y empujó la puerta a su espalda, pero tan suavemente que volvió a dejarla abierta. «Me distraeré ordenando su habitación -pensó-. Me gustaría hacer algo por él antes que guardar cama como una inválida.» Empezó arreglando los cajones, y en uno de ellos encontró abierta la libreta de su banquero. «Pobre cariño mío, ¡qué descuidado es! Los criados podrían haberse enterado de todos sus asuntos, si no se me hubiera ocurrido asomarme.» Ordenó los cajones; luego pasó a los diversos objetos esparcidos sobre una mesa auxiliar. Entre los papeles vio un pequeño y viejo libro de música con su nombre escrito en tinta descolorida. La alegría del hallazgo la hizo ruborizarse como una jovenzuela. «¡Qué bueno es conmigo! Se acuerda de mi pobre y viejo libro de música y lo guarda para mí.» Cuando se sentó junto a la mesa con el libro abierto, el tiempo pasado volvió a ella con toda su ternura. El reloj dio la media, dio los tres cuartos, y ella seguía sentada allí con el libro de música sobre el regazo, reviviendo felizmente en sueños las viejas canciones, pensando con agradecimiento en la época dorada en que la mano de su marido pasaba las páginas para ella, en que su voz le susurraba las palabras que la memoria de una mujer jamás olvida.

Norah se despegó del volumen que estaba leyendo y miró el reloj que había sobre la repisa de la chimenea de la biblioteca.

- Si papá vuelve en tren -dijo-, estará aquí dentro de diez minutos.

La señorita Garth se sobresaltó y alzó los ojos soñolientos del libro que acababa de caérsele de la mano.

- No creo que vuelva en tren -replicó-. Volverá trotando, como ha comentado Magdalen irrespetuosamente, en la calesa del molinero.

Alguien llamó a la puerta de la biblioteca mientras pronunciaba estas palabras. Apareció el lacayo y se dirigió a la señorita Garth.

- Una persona desea verla, señora.

- ¿Quién es?

- No lo sé, señora. Un desconocido para mí; un hombre de aspecto respetable; y ha manifestado el deseo expreso de hablar con usted.

La señorita Garth salió al vestíbulo. El lacayo cerró la puerta de la biblioteca y se retiró bajando por la escalera de la cocina.

El hombre se hallaba junto a la puerta principal, sin salir del felpudo. No cesaba de mover los ojos, estaba pálido, parecía enfermo, parecía asustado. Manoseaba su gorro con nerviosismo y lo movía hacia atrás y hacia delante, pasándoselo de una mano a otra.

- ¿Quería usted verme? -preguntó la señorita Garth.

- Le ruego me disculpe, señora. Usted no es la señora Vanstone, ¿verdad?

- Por supuesto que no. Soy la señorita Garth. ¿Por qué lo pregunta?

- Trabajo en la oficina del jefe de la estación de Grailsea...

- ¿Sí?

- Me han encomendado...

Se interrumpió de nuevo. Su mirada errante se posó en el felpudo y sus manos inquietas estrujaron el gorro con mayor fuerza. Se humedeció los secos labios y volvió a intentarlo.

- Me han encomendado que le transmita una grave noticia.

- ¿Grave para mí?

- Grave para todos en esta casa.

La señorita Garth dio un paso hacia él; le miró a los ojos con firmeza. Se le heló la sangre en pleno calor veraniego.

- ¡Alto! -dijo con súbita desconfianza, y lanzó una mirada de preocupación a la puerta de la salita. Estaba cerrada-. Dígame lo peor; y hable bajo. Ha habido un accidente. ¿Dónde?

- En la vía férrea. Cerca de la estación de Grailsea.

- ¿El tren en dirección a Londres?

- No, el que volvía a la una cincuenta...

- ¡Que Dios Todopoderoso nos asista! ¿El tren en que el señor Vanstone se dirigía a Grailsea?

- El mismo. Me han enviado aquí en el tren que va a Londres; han despejado la vía justo a tiempo para que pueda circular. No han querido dar la noticia por escrito; me han dicho que debía ver a «la señorita Garth» y contárselo. Hay siete pasajeros gravemente heridos y dos...

La siguiente palabra murió en sus labios; alzó la mano en el más absoluto silencio. Con los ojos desorbitados por el horror, alzó la mano y señaló por encima del hombro de la señorita Garth.

Ésta se volvió a medias y miró hacia atrás.

Frente a ella, en el umbral de la puerta del estudio, se hallaba la dueña de la casa. Llevaba su viejo libro de música apretado con ambas manos, con fuerza maquinal. Era un espectro de sí misma. Con una espantosa vaciedad en la mirada, con una espantosa

serenidad en la voz, repitió las últimas palabras del hombre:

- Siete pasajeros gravemente heridos y dos...

Sus torturados dedos aflojaron la presa, el libro cayó; ella se desplomó hacia delante pesadamente. La señorita Garth la cogió antes de que cayera; la cogió y se volvió hacia el hombre con el cuerpo desmayado de la esposa en los brazos para oír el destino fatal del marido.

- El mal ya está hecho -dijo-, puede hablar. ¿Está herido o muerto?

- Muerto.

CAPÍTULO XI

El sol descendió en el cielo; la brisa del oeste filtraba su frescor en el interior de la casa. A medida que avanzaba la tarde, el alegre repicar del reloj de la aldea se acercaba cada vez más. Campos y jardín notaron el influjo de la hora y despidieron sus más dulces fragancias. Las aves de la pajarera de Norah tomaban el sol en la quietud del atardecer y cantaban su adiós agradecido al día agonizante.

Detenida sólo por un momento, la implacable rutina de la casa se reanudó horriblemente como todos los días. Los criados, presas del pánico, se refugiaron ciegamente en los deberes propios de la hora. El lacayo, sin hacer ruido, puso la mesa para cenar. La doncella aguardó sentada, sumida en una duda absurda, con las jarras de agua caliente para los dormitorios alineadas como de costumbre junto a ella. El jardinero, a quien habían ordenado que se presentara ante su señor con los recibos de un dinero que había pagado de más, contraviniendo las instrucciones, afirmó que le tenía un gran afecto y dejó los recibos a la hora convenida. La costumbre, que jamás cede, y la muerte, que a nadie perdona, se encontraron en el naufragio de la felicidad humana, y la muerte le cedió el paso.

Las negras y tormentosas nubes de la tristeza pendían sobre la casa; ya eran negras, pero habían de serlo más aún. A las cinco había golpeado la calamidad dejando su conmoción. Antes de que hubiera pasado una hora, el descubrimiento de la súbita muerte del marido fue seguido por la incertidumbre del peligro mortal en que se hallaba la mujer. Una desvalida señora Vanstone yacía en su lecho de viuda; su vida y la vida del hijo no nacido pendían de un hilo.

Sólo una persona mantuvo la posesión de sus facultades mentales; sólo un espíritu guía supo moverse con utilidad en medio del luto.

Si en sus primeros años la señorita Garth hubiera gozado de la calma y la felicidad de los últimos en Combe-Raven, tal vez se habría desplomado bajo las crueles necesidades que exigía la circunstancia. Pero la señorita Garth había visto su juventud puesta a prueba por las desgracias familiares, y se enfrentó con sus terribles deberes con la valentía de una mujer que había aprendido a sufrir sin desfallecer. Ella sola pasó por el amargo trance de decir a las hijas que habían perdido a su padre. Ella sola se esforzó luego por sostenerlas cuando la espantosa certeza de su pérdida se grabó por fin en su espíritu.

Le preocupaba menos la hermana mayor. La agonía de la congoja se manifestó exteriormente en Norah con el alivio natural de las lágrimas. No fue así con Magdalen. Muda y con los ojos secos, Magdalen se sentó en la habitación en la que había recibido la noticia de la muerte de su padre; su rostro se hallaba petrificado de forma antinatural por el dolor estéril de una edad más avanzada, vacío, blanco, inmóvil, horrible de ver. Nada la sacó de este estado, nada consiguió ablandarla. Sólo dijo: «No me habléis; no me toquéis. Dejadme sufrirlo en silencio» y calló de nuevo. La primera aflicción grave que había ensombrecido la vida de las jóvenes parecía haber alterado ya su carácter habitual.

Cayó el crepúsculo y se difuminó, y la noche estival llegó cuajada de estrellas. Cuando se encendió la primera luz, cuidadosamente atenuada en la habitación de la enferma, llegó el médico de Bristol al que habían llamado para consultar con el médico de la familia. No pudo ofrecerles el menor consuelo, únicamente decirles: «Sólo nos queda esperar. El golpe recibido al oír la noticia de la muerte de su marido la ha privado de las fuerzas en el momento en que más las necesita. No se escatimarán esfuerzos para salvar su vida. Me quedaré aquí toda la noche».

Mientras hablaba, abrió una de las ventanas para que entrara más aire. La ventana daba al sendero de entrada de carruajes y a la carretera. Unas cuantas personas en pequeños grupos contemplaban la casa desde la verja. «Si esas personas hacen ruido - dijo el médico-, deben advertirles que se vayan.» No hubo necesidad de advertirles;

eran tan sólo los braceros que trabajaban en la finca del difunto, y aquí y allá algunas mujeres y niños de la aldea. Todos pensaban en él -algunos hablaban de él- y sus cerebros perezosos se estimulaban viendo la casa. Los señores de los alrededores eran buenos con ellos en su mayor parte (decían los hombres), pero no había nadie como él. Las mujeres comentaban en susurros los modales tranquilizadores que mostraba cuando visitaba sus humildes hogares. «Era un hombre alegre, pobre; y también era muy atento con nosotros: no entraba nunca y se quedaba mirando durante las comidas; los demás nos ayudan y nos regañan; lo único que él nos decía era: irá mejor la próxima vez.» De este modo continuaron hablando de él y contemplando su casa y su jardín, y se alejaron torpemente en grupos de dos y de tres, con la vaga sensación de que su agradable rostro no volvería a servirles de consuelo. El más lerdo entre ellos supo esa noche que las penurias de la pobreza serían más duras de sobrellevar ahora que el señor se había ido.

Un poco más tarde llegó a la puerta del dormitorio la noticia de que el señor Clare padre había llegado solo a la casa y aguardaba en el vestíbulo para informarse de la opinión del médico. La señorita Garth no pudo bajar en persona y envió un mensaje. El señor Clare dijo al criado: «Volveré a preguntar dentro de dos horas», y se fue caminando lentamente. Al contrario que otros hombres en circunstancias parecidas, la repentina muerte de su viejo amigo no había producido ningún cambio visible en él. Los sentimientos que implicaba el haberse desplazado para inquirir por la señora Vanstone constituyeron la única muestra de compasión humana que dejó entrever aquel viejo rudo e impenetrable.

Volvió cuando expiró el plazo de dos horas, y esta vez la señorita Garth salió a recibirlo.

Se estrecharon la mano en silencio. Ella aguardó; hizo acopio de energías para oírle hablar del amigo perdido. No; el señor Clare no mencionó en ningún momento el trágico accidente, jamás aludió a la espantosa muerte. Pronunció estas palabras:

- ¿Está mejor o peor? -Y no dijo más. ¿Estaba el tributo de su pesar por el marido severamente contenido bajo la expresión de su inquietud por la mujer? La naturaleza de aquel hombre, inflexible antagonista del mundo y sus costumbres, podía muy bien justificar tal interpretación de su conducta. Repitió la pregunta-: ¿Está mejor o peor?

- Mejor no -respondió la señorita Garth-; si algún cambio hay es para peor.

Intercambiaron estas frases junto a la ventana de la salita que se abría al jardín. El señor Clare hizo una pausa tras escuchar la respuesta a su pregunta, salió al sendero del jardín, luego se volvió de repente y volvió a hablar:

- ¿La ha desahuciado ya el médico? -preguntó.

- No nos ha ocultado que su vida corre peligro. Sólo nos queda rezar por ella.

El viejo posó la mano sobre el brazo de la señorita Garth mientras ésta le respondía y la miró atentamente a la cara.

- ¿Cree usted en las plegarias? -dijo.

La señorita Garth se apartó de él con pesadumbre.

- Podría usted haberme ahorrado esa pregunta, señor, en un momento como éste.

Él no hizo caso de su respuesta; seguía con la mirada fija en su rostro.

- ¡Rece! -dijo-. Rece como no ha rezado jamás hasta ahora, por la vida de la señora Vanstone.

El señor Clare se fue. Su voz y su actitud daban a entender algún indecible temor sobre el futuro que sus palabras no habían confesado. La señorita Garth lo siguió hasta el jardín y lo llamó. Él la oyó, pero no se dio la vuelta; aligeró el paso, como si quisiera evitarla. Ella lo contempló alejarse bajo la luz de la luna del cálido verano. Vio sus

manos blancas y arrugadas, las vio de repente recortadas sobre el fondo negro de la arboleda, alzadas, retorciéndose por encima de su cabeza. Las dejó caer; los árboles lo sumieron en la oscuridad; se había ido.

La señorita Garth regresó junto a la enferma con la carga de una preocupación más sobre sus hombros.

Pasaban entonces de las once. Había transcurrido un buen rato desde que viera a las hermanas y hablara con ellas. Con las preguntas que dirigió a una de las criadas sólo consiguió extraer la información de que ambas se hallaban en sus respectivas habitaciones. Demoró su vuelta junto al lecho de la madre para decir las últimas palabras de consuelo a las hijas antes de que éstas se retiraran a dormir. La habitación de Norah era la más cercana. La señorita Garth abrió la puerta con suavidad y se asomó al interior. La figura arrodillada junto al lecho le sugirió que la ayuda de Dios había acudido a la hija huérfana en aquel momento de aflicción. Lágrimas de gratitud acudieron a sus ojos mientras la miraba; suavemente cerró la puerta y continuó hasta la habitación de Magdalen. Allí la duda detuvo sus pasos en el umbral y aguardó unos instantes antes de entrar.

Su oído captó un sonido en la estancia -el monótono frufrú del vestido de una mujer, ahora distante, ahora cercano, sonando sin cesar por el suelo-, un sonido que le indicó que Magdalen se paseaba de un lado a otro en la intimidad de su cuarto. La señorita Garth llamó a la puerta. El frufrú cesó, la puerta se abrió y el triste rostro juvenil apareció ante ella, encerrado en su fría desesperanza; los grandes ojos claros la miraron como un autómata, tan vacíos y secos como antes.

Esa mirada le partió el corazón a la fiel mujer que había sido su maestra y la había amado desde que era niña. Abrazó a Magdalen con ternura.

- Oh, cariño mío -dijo-, ¡aún sin lágrimas! ¡Oh, si pudiera verte a ti como he visto a Norah! Háblame, Magdalen; prueba a hablar conmigo.

Magdalen lo intentó y habló:

- Norah no siente remordimientos. Papá no atendía a sus intereses cuando fue al encuentro de la muerte, sino a los míos.

Después de tan terrible respuesta, posó los fríos labios sobre la mejilla de la señorita Garth.

- Déjeme sufrir a solas -dijo, y cerró la puerta despacio.

Una vez más la señorita Garth se quedó esperando en el umbral, y de nuevo el frufrú del vestido se oyó de un lado a otro -ahora lejos, ahora cerca- con una regularidad mecánica y cruel que enfriaba la más cálida compasión y desalentaba la esperanza más osada.

Pasó la noche. Se había acordado que, si por la mañana no había muestras de mejoría, se llamaría para el día siguiente al médico de Londres a quien la señora Vanstone había consultado unos meses atrás. No hubo mejoría, y se envió a buscar al médico.

Avanzada la mañana, llegó Frank para hacer averiguaciones. ¿Había confiado el señor Clare a su hijo el deber que él personalmente había cumplido el día anterior, reacio a volver a ver a la señorita Garth después de lo que le había dicho? Tal vez. Frank no pudo arrojar luz sobre el asunto; su padre no se lo había comunicado. Frank estaba pálido y desencajado. Sus primeras preguntas sobre Magdalen mostraron hasta qué punto su débil naturaleza había flaqueado ante la desgracia. No era capaz de formular sus propias preguntas, las palabras vacilaban en sus labios y lágrimas fáciles brotaban de sus ojos. La señorita Garth lo miró con simpatía por primera vez. El dolor tiene en sí esta nobleza: acepta toda compasión, provenga de donde provenga. Animó al joven con unas cuantas palabras amables y le estrechó la mano al despedirse.

Frank regresó con un segundo mensaje antes del mediodía. Su padre deseaba saber si

se esperaba al señor Pendril en Combe-Raven ese mismo día. En caso de que aguardaran la llegada del abogado, Frank tenía instrucciones de ir a recibirlo a la estación y llevarlo a la casa del señor Clare, donde tendría una cama a su disposición. Este mensaje tomó a la señorita Garth por sorpresa. Demostraba que el señor Clare conocía el propósito de su difunto amigo de convocar al señor Pendril. ¿Era la hospitalaria oferta del viejo señor Clare otra expresión indirecta de la natural y humana aflicción que él se empecinaba en ocultar?, ¿o tal vez conocía la secreta necesidad que suponía la presencia del señor Pendril y que la desconsolada familia ignoraba por completo? La señorita Garth estaba demasiado abatida y desesperada para detenerse a pensar en ello. Dijo a Frank que esperaban al señor Pendril a las tres y le envió a su casa dándole las gracias.

Poco después de su partida, toda la inquietud que en aquellos momentos podía sentir por Magdalen recibió el alivio de una noticia mejor de lo que su experiencia de la pasada noche le habría inducido a esperar. Norah había ejercido su influencia para ayudar a su hermana, y esa paciente comprensión de Norah le había hecho liberar el dolor contenido. Magdalen había sufrido grandemente -había sufrido lo inevitable en una naturaleza como la suya- con ese esfuerzo que la aliviaba. Las reparadoras lágrimas no habían brotado con suavidad; habían surgido en un torrente con vehemencia torturadora y apasionada, pero Norah no se había apartado de su lado hasta que, concluida la lucha, había llegado la calma. Estas nuevas animaron a la señorita Garth a retirarse a su dormitorio y procurarse el descanso que tanto necesitaba. Exhaustos el cuerpo y la mente, se durmió de puro agotamiento; durmió pesadamente, sin soñar, durante unas horas. Eran entre las tres y las cuatro de la tarde cuando la despertó una de las criadas. La mujer llevaba una nota en la mano; una nota que había dejado el señor Clare hijo con el deseo de que se la hicieran llegar a la señorita Garth de inmediato. El nombre escrito en la esquina inferior del sobre era «William Pendril». El abogado había llegado.

La señorita Garth abrió la nota. Tras unas cuantas breves frases de condolencia, el abogado anunciaba su llegada a casa del señor Clare y luego continuaba, aparentemente en su calidad de abogado, formulando una sorprendente petición.

«Si -escribía-, se produjera alguna mejoría en el estado de la señora Vanstone -tanto si es una mejoría pasajera, como si es la mejoría permanente que todos esperamos-, en cualquier caso, le ruego que me lo hagan saber de inmediato. Es de la máxima importancia que la vea en el caso de que recobre las fuerzas suficientes para prestarme su atención cinco minutos y la capacidad de firmar al cabo de ese tiempo. ¿Puedo rogarle que transmita mi petición, de manera estrictamente confidencial, a los médicos que la atienden? Ellos comprenderán y usted comprenderá la importancia vital que concedo a esa entrevista cuando le diga que por su causa he aplazado cualquier otro asunto que reclamase mi atención y que estoy preparado para acudir a su llamada a cualquier hora del día o de la noche.» De esta forma concluía la carta. La señorita Garth la leyó dos veces de cabo a rabo. En la segunda lectura, la petición que le hacía el abogado y las palabras de despedida que habían escapado de los labios del señor Clare el día anterior se relacionaron vagamente en sus pensamientos. Existía algún otro grave asunto pendiente que conocían el señor Pendril y el señor Clare, aparte del interés primero y principal, que era el restablecimiento de la señora Vanstone. ¿A quién afectaba? ¿A las hijas? ¿Se hallaban éstas amenazadas por alguna nueva calamidad que la firma de su madre podría detener? ¿Qué quería decir eso? ¿Quería decir que el señor Vanstone había muerto sin testar?

La angustia y la confusión no permitían a la señorita Garth discurrir como hubiera hecho en tiempos mejores. Se dirigió presurosa a la antecámara del dormitorio de la señora Vanstone y, tras explicar la posición del señor Pendril en la familia, depositó su carta en manos de los médicos. Ambos ofrecieron idéntica respuesta sin titubeos. El estado de la señora Vanstone hacía totalmente imposible la entrevista que el abogado deseaba. Si salía de su postración, la señorita Garth sería informada de inmediato. Mientras tanto, la respuesta al señor Pendril podía resumirse en una sola palabra: imposible.

- ¿Comprenden ustedes la importancia que atribuye el señor Pendril a la entrevista? -

dijo la señorita Garth.

Sí, ambos médicos lo comprendían.

- Estoy perdida y confusa, caballeros, por la incertidumbre. ¿Adivina alguno de ustedes por qué se necesita la firma, o cuál puede ser el motivo de la entrevista? Yo sólo he visto al señor Pendril cuando ha venido aquí en alguna otra ocasión; no tengo derecho a interrogarle. ¿Quieren volver a leer la carta? ¿Creen ustedes que da a entender que el señor Vanstone no hizo testamento?

- Creo que difícilmente puede dar a entender eso -dijo uno de los médicos-. Pero aun suponiendo que el señor Vanstone hubiera muerto sin testar, la ley se hace cargo de los intereses de su viuda y sus hijos...

- ¿Sería así -interpuso el otro médico-, si los bienes resultaran ser bienes raíces?

- No estoy seguro. ¿Sabe usted por casualidad, señorita Garth, si los bienes del señor Vanstone consistían en tierras o en dinero?

- En dinero -respondió la señorita Garth-. Se lo oí decir en más de una ocasión.

- Entonces puedo calmar su inquietud hablando por experiencia propia. Si ha muerto sin testar, la ley otorgará un tercio de su propiedad a su viuda, y dividirá el resto entre sus hijos a partes iguales.

- Pero ¿y si la señora Vanstone...?

- Si la señora Vanstone muriera -continuó el médico, completando la pregunta que la señorita Garth no había tenido ánimos para acabar por sí misma-, creo estar en lo cierto al afirmar que por ley los bienes pasarían a los hijos. Sea cual sea el motivo para la entrevista que solicita el señor Pendril, no veo razón alguna para relacionarlo con la suposición de que el señor Vanstone haya muerto sin testar. Pero no dude en formular la pregunta al propio señor Pendril para quedarse más tranquila.

La señorita Garth renunció a seguir directamente el consejo del médico. Tras comunicar al señor Pendril la decisión médica que por el momento le negaba la entrevista que pedía, añadió un breve resumen de la cuestión legal que les había planteado e insinuó con delicadeza la natural impaciencia que sentía por conocer los motivos que habían llevado al abogado a hacer su petición. Recibió una respuesta extremadamente precavida, que no le proporcionó una impresión favorable del señor Pendril. El abogado confirmaba la interpretación de la ley que hacían los médicos sólo en términos generales; expresaba su intención de aguardar en casa del señor Clare con la esperanza de que una posible mejoría le permitiera ver a la señora Vanstone y concluía la carta sin la menor explicación de sus motivos y sin una sola palabra referente a la cuestión de la existencia o inexistencia del testamento del señor Vanstone.

La apreciable cautela de la respuesta del abogado mantuvo a la señorita Garth sumida en la zozobra hasta que el tan esperado acontecimiento de aquel día hizo que todos sus pensamientos se concentraran en la preocupación por la señora Vanstone.

Al anochecer llegó el médico de Londres. Contempló a la enferma durante largo rato; consultó con sus colegas durante un intervalo más largo aún; volvió a la habitación de la enferma antes de que la señorita Garth pudiera convencerle de que le comunicara la opinión que se había formado.

Cuando el médico salió a la antecámara por segunda vez, se sentó en silencio junto a ella. La señorita Garth le miró a la cara y su última y débil esperanza murió en ella antes de que el médico abriera los labios.

- Debo decirle la cruda realidad -dijo amablemente-. Todo lo que podía hacerse se ha hecho. En las próximas veinticuatro horas como máximo se despejará la incertidumbre. Si la naturaleza no hace un esfuerzo en ese tiempo, lamento tener que decirle que ha de prepararse para lo peor.

Esas palabras lo dijeron todo; fueron proféticas.

Pasó la noche, y ella sobrevivió. Llegado el día siguiente, aguantó hasta que el reloj señaló las cinco. A esa hora la noticia de la muerte de su marido había asestado el golpe mortal. Cuando volvió a ser esa misma hora, la misericordia de Dios permitió que la señora Vanstone se reuniera con su marido en el otro mundo. Sus hijas se hallaban arrodilladas junto a su lecho en el momento de fallecer. Las dejó sin ser consciente de su presencia; por fortuna y por misericordia, fue insensible al dolor del último adiós.

Su hijo le sobrevivió hasta el final de la tarde, cuando el crepúsculo brillaba tenuemente en el silencioso cielo de occidente. Al anochecer, la luz de aquella vida frágil y menuda -débil desde el principio- vaciló y se extinguió. Los restos mortales de la madre y el hijo yacieron esa noche sobre la misma cama. El Ángel de la Muerte había cumplido su espantosa tarea, y las dos hermanas quedaron solas en el mundo.

CAPÍTULO XII

La mañana del jueves veintitrés de julio, más temprano de lo habitual, apareció el señor Clare en la puerta de su casita y salió a su pequeño jardín.

Había dado a solas unas cuantas vueltas de un lado a otro, cuando apareció un hombre delgado y tranquilo de cabellos grises cuya apariencia estaba desprovista de personalidad alguna, cuyo rostro inexpresivo y cuyos modales, de una calma convencional, no tenían nada que atrajera la aprobación de los demás, aunque tampoco nada que inspirara desagrado. Aquél era el señor Pendril; aquél era el hombre de cuyos labios pendía el futuro de las huérfanas de Combe-Raven.

- Se acerca la hora -dijo, mirando hacia la arboleda, cuando se reunió con el señor Clare-. Estoy citado con la señorita Garth a las once; sólo faltan diez minutos.

- ¿Se entrevistará con ella a solas? -preguntó el señor Clare.

- Dejé que lo decidiera la señorita Garth, después de advertirle, sobre todo, de que las circunstancias que estoy obligado a revelar son de una gravísima naturaleza.

- ¿Y qué ha decidido?

- Me ha enviado una nota diciendo que ha mencionado mi cita a las dos hijas y les ha repetido la advertencia que le di. La mayor de las dos no se ve con ánimos (¿y a quién puede extrañar?) de mantener una conversación relacionada con el futuro apenas un día después del funeral. La más joven, al parecer, no ha expresado su opinión. Según creo, se deja guiar pasivamente por el ejemplo de su hermana. Mi entrevista, por tanto, se llevará a cabo únicamente con la señorita Garth; y para mí es un gran alivio saberlo.

Pronunció las últimas palabras con mayor énfasis y energía de lo que parecía habitual en él. El señor Clare se detuvo y miró a su invitado con detenimiento.

- Es usted casi tan viejo como yo, señor -dijo-. ¿Aún no le ha endurecido su larga experiencia como abogado?

- No era consciente de lo poco que me había endurecido -respondió el señor Pendril tranquilamente- hasta que regresé ayer de Londres para asistir al funeral. No me habían avisado de que las hijas habían decidido acompañar a sus padres a la tumba. Creo que su presencia hizo que la escena última de esta espantosa calamidad fuera doblemente dolorosa y conmovedora. Usted vio cómo se emocionó todo el mundo, tantas personas como concurrieron, y eso que ellas ignoraban la verdad; nada sabían de la cruel necesidad que me lleva a la casa esta mañana. El sentido de esa necesidad, y la visión de esas pobres muchachas en unos momentos en que mi arduo deber para con ellas me resulta muy doloroso, me trastornó como por ninguna causa de angustia presente ni incertidumbre futura le suele ocurrir a un hombre de mis años y de mi estilo de vida. No me he recuperado aún; todavía no me siento seguro de mí mismo.

- El aplomo de un hombre, cuando se trata de un hombre como usted, le llega cuando lo necesita -dijo el señor Clare-. Seguramente habrá tenido antes que cumplir a su manera con deberes tan penosos como el que le aguarda esta mañana.

El señor Pendril meneó la cabeza.

- Muchos deberes igualmente serios; muchas historias más románticas. Ningún deber tan penoso; ninguna historia tan desesperada como ésta.

Tras estas palabras se separaron. El señor Pendril abandonó el jardín para entrar en el sendero de la arboleda que conducía a Combe-Raven. El señor Clare volvió a entrar en la casa.

Entrando en el pasillo, miró por la puerta abierta de su pequeño gabinete y vio a Frank

sentado allí en ociosa aflicción, con la cabeza apoyada pesadamente en la mano.

- He recibido respuesta de tus jefes de Londres -dijo el señor Clare-. En consideración a lo ocurrido, aceptan mantener la oferta que te hicieron durante un mes más.

Frank mudó de color y se levantó de la silla con nerviosismo.

- ¿Han variado mis perspectivas? -preguntó-. ¿No se van a llevar a cabo los planes que tenía el señor Vanstone para mí? Le dijo a Magdalen que en su testamento aseguraba su porvenir. Magdalen me repitió estas palabras, me dijo que debía conocer cuanto la bondad y la generosidad de su padre había hecho por nosotros dos. ¿Por qué su muerte habría de cambiar las cosas? ¿Ha ocurrido algo?

- Espera a que el señor Pendril vuelva de Combe-Raven -contestó su padre-. No me preguntes a mí, pregúntale a él.

Lágrimas prontas afluyeron a los ojos de Frank.

- No serás duro conmigo, ¿verdad? -suplicó débilmente-. No esperarás que vuelva a Londres sin ver antes a Magdalen...

El señor Clare miró a su hijo pensativamente y reflexionó antes de contestar.

- Puedes secarte las lágrimas -dijo-. Volverás a ver a Magdalen antes de marcharte.

Abandonó la habitación después de responder y se retiró a su estudio. Los libros le aguardaban al alcance de la mano, como siempre. Abrió uno de ellos y se dispuso a leer como acostumbraba. Pero se distraía y apartaba la vista del libro de vez en cuando hacia la silla vacía que tenía delante, la silla en la que se había sentado su viejo amigo y compadre para discutir con él festivamente durante tantos años. Tras luchar consigo mismo, cerró el libro.

- ¡Maldita silla! -dijo-, hablará de él, y tendré que escucharla. -Cogió su pipa de la pared y la llenó de tabaco con gesto mecánico. Le temblaba la mano, sus ojos se desviaron de nuevo hacia la silla y se le escapó involuntariamente un hondo suspiro. Aquella silla vacía era el único razonamiento terrenal para el que no tenía respuesta: su corazón reconoció la derrota y le humedeció los ojos a su pesar-. Por fin me ha vencido -dijo el arisco anciano-. Tenía aún un punto débil, y él lo ha encontrado.

Mientras tanto, el señor Pendril entraba en la arboleda y seguía el sendero que conducía al jardín solitario y la casa desolada. En la puerta le recibió el criado, que aparentemente aguardaba allí su llegada.

- Tengo una cita con la señorita Garth. ¿Está preparada para verme?

- Absolutamente preparada, señor.

- ¿Está sola?

- Sí, señor.

- ¿En la habitación que era el estudio del señor Vanstone?

- En esa habitación, señor.

El criado abrió la puerta y el señor Pendril entró.

La institutriz estaba sola junto a la ventana del estudio. Hacía un calor sofocante; estaba subiendo la hoja inferior de la ventana de guillotina para que entrara más aire en la estancia cuando llegó el señor Pendril.

Se saludaron inclinando la cabeza con cortés formalidad, traicionando ambos una

incómoda sensación de reserva. El señor Pendril era uno de esos hombres cuyo aspecto externo sufre las peores consecuencias cuando ha de dominar una intensa agitación mental. La señorita, por su parte, no había olvidado los términos cautelosos y descorteses con que el abogado había contestado a su misiva, y en la inquietud natural que había sentido con respecto a la entrevista no había el alivio posible de una opinión favorable sobre el hombre que la solicitaba. Cuando se miraron el uno al otro en el silencio de la mañana estival -ambos vestidos de negro; las duras facciones de la señorita Garth demacradas y macilentas por la pena; el rostro frío e incoloro del abogado carente de toda expresión, quizá un azoramiento profesional y nada más- habría resultado difícil hallar dos personas menos capaces externamente de atraer las simpatías de nadie que aquellas dos que se habían reunido allí, una para contar, la otra para escuchar, los secretos de los muertos.

- Lamento sinceramente, señorita Garth, molestarla en un momento como éste. Pero las circunstancias, como ya he explicado, no me dejan otra alternativa.

- ¿Quiere tomar asiento, señor Pendril? Según tengo entendido quería usted verme en esta habitación.

- Sólo porque los papeles del señor Vanstone están guardados aquí y puede que sea necesario que me refiera a algunos de ellos.

Tras este intercambio formal de comentarios, se sentaron a ambos lados de una mesa situada cerca de la ventana. Uno esperaba para hablar; la otra, para escuchar. Se produjo un silencio momentáneo. El señor Pendril lo rompió refiriéndose a las jóvenes con las preguntas habituales y las habituales expresiones de condolencia. La señorita Garth le respondió con igual ceremonia, en el mismo tono convencional. Hubo una segunda pausa. El zumbido de las moscas entre los arbustos de siemprevivas que crecían bajo la ventana penetró perezosamente en la habitación y el ruido de los pesados cascos de un caballo de tiro que avanzaba con dificultad por la carretera que se extendía más allá del jardín era tan audible en medio del silencio como si fuera de noche.

El abogado hizo acopio de valor y se ciñó al tema cuando volvió a tomar la palabra.

- Tiene usted motivos, señorita Garth -empezó-, para no sentirse del todo satisfecha con mi pasada conducta en una cuestión en concreto. Durante la fatal enfermedad de la señora Vanstone, me dirigió usted una carta en la que formulaba ciertas preguntas, a las cuales, mientras ella vivía, me era imposible responder. Su lamentable muerte me libera de la reserva que me había impuesto a mí mismo y me permite o, mejor dicho, me obliga, a hablar. Sabrá usted ahora las graves razones que tenía para aguardar día y noche con la esperanza de obtener la entrevista que desgraciadamente jamás se llevó a cabo; y, haciendo justicia a la memoria del señor Vanstone, sus propios ojos serán testigos de que hizo testamento.

Se levantó, abrió una pequeña caja fuerte que había en un rincón de la estancia y regresó a la mesa con varias hojas de papel dobladas, que extendió bajo la mirada de la señorita Garth. Cuando ella hubo leído las primeras palabras, «En el nombre de Dios, amén», volvió la hoja y señaló el final de la página siguiente. La señorita Garth vio la firma que tan bien conocía: «Andrew Vanstone». Vio las firmas habituales de los dos testigos y la fecha del documento, datado hacía más de cinco años. Habiéndola convencido de esta forma de la legalidad del testamento, el abogado intervino antes de que pudiera hacerle preguntas, dirigiéndose a ella con las siguientes palabras:

- No quiero engañarla -dijo-. Tengo motivos personales para mostrarle este documento.

- ¿Qué motivos, señor?

- Los oirá. Cuando conozca usted la verdad, puede que estas páginas sirvan para que conserve el respeto a la memoria del señor Vanstone…

La señorita Garth dio un respingo en la silla.

- ¿Qué quiere decir? -preguntó con grave franqueza.

Él no prestó atención a la pregunta; prosiguió como si no le hubiera interrumpido.

- Tengo un segundo motivo -continuó- para enseñarle el testamento. Si puedo convencerla de que lea ciertas cláusulas bajo mi supervisión, descubrirá por sí misma las circunstancias que he venido a desvelar; circunstancias tan penosas que no sé cómo comunicárselas de mis propios labios.

La señorita Garth le miró abiertamente.

- ¿Circunstancias, señor, que afectan a los padres muertos o a las hijas vivas?

- Que afectan a los muertos y a los vivos por igual -respondió el abogado-. Circunstancias, lamento decir, que conciernen al futuro de las desventuradas hijas del señor Vanstone.

- Aguarde -dijo la señorita Garth-, aguarde un momento. -Se apartó los mechones grises de las sienes y se esforzó por superar la angustia, la espantosa debilidad del terror que se habría adueñado de una mujer más joven o menos resuelta. Sus ojos oscurecidos por la vigilia, cansados por el dolor, buscaron el rostro impenetrable del abogado-. ¿Sus desventuradas hijas? -repitió para sí, distraídamente-. Habla de ellas como si existiera una calamidad peor que la que las ha convertido en huérfanas. -Volvió a hacer una pausa y recobró el ánimo-. No haré su difícil tarea, señor, más dolorosa, mientras pueda evitarlo -prosiguió-. Muéstreme las cláusulas del testamento. Déjeme leerlas y saber lo peor.

El señor Pendril volvió a la primera página y señaló cierto lugar en las apretadas líneas de escritura.

- Empiece aquí -dijo.

Ella intentó leer, intentó seguir el dedo como lo había seguido antes hasta las firmas y las fechas. Pero sus sentidos parecían compartir la confusión de su cabeza; las palabras se entremezclaban y las líneas bailaban ante sus ojos.

- No puedo seguirle -dijo-. Tendrá que decírmelo o leérmelo. -Apartó la silla de la mesa e intentó dominarse-. ¡Deténgase! -exclamó cuando el abogado cogió los papeles con vacilación y reticencia evidentes-. Primero una pregunta. ¿Se asegura el porvenir de las hijas en este testamento?

- El testamento lo aseguraba cuando se hizo.

- ¿Cuando se hizo? -Algo de su natural aspereza surgió en su tono cuando repitió la respuesta-. ¿Lo asegura ahora?

- No.

La señorita Garth le arrancó el testamento de las manos y lo arrojó a un rincón.

- Su intención es buena -dijo-; quiere usted ayudarme, pero está perdiendo el tiempo y malgastando mis fuerzas. Si el testamento es inútil, que se quede donde está. ¡Dígame la verdad, señor Pendril, dígamela con claridad, ahora mismo, con sus propias palabras!

El abogado pensó que sería una crueldad innecesaria resistirse a esa súplica. No había alternativa más misericordiosa que responder de inmediato.

- Debo remitirla a la primavera de este año, señorita Garth. ¿Recuerda usted el cuatro de marzo?

La atención de la señorita Garth volvió a desviarse; una idea parecía haberla asaltado en el momento en que él hablaba. En lugar de responder a la pregunta, formuló otra.

- Permítame que me dé yo misma la noticia -dijo-; permítame adelantarme a usted si

puedo. El testamento inservible, el modo en que habla de sus hijas, la duda que parece usted albergar en cuanto a que conserve el respeto a la memoria del señor Vanstone, me han abierto los ojos a una nueva perspectiva. El señor Vanstone estaba arruinado; ¿es eso lo que tenía que decirme?

- Todo lo contrario. El señor Vanstone ha dejado una fortuna de más de ochenta mil libras, una fortuna invertida en excelentes valores. Vivía de acuerdo con sus ingresos, pero jamás por encima de ellos, y la suma de todas sus deudas no alcanzaría las doscientas libras. De haber estado arruinado, yo lo hubiera lamentado profundamente por sus hijas, pero no hubiera vacilado en contarle a usted la verdad como vacilo ahora. Permítame repetirle una pregunta que no ha oído, creo, cuando se la he hecho por primera vez. Retroceda hasta la primavera de este año. ¿Recuerda el cuatro de marzo?

- Mi memoria para las fechas es mala en el mejor de los casos -dijo la señorita Garth, meneando la cabeza-. Estoy demasiado confusa para ejercitarla de improviso. ¿No podría plantear la pregunta de otra forma?

El señor Pendril preguntó en la forma siguiente:

- ¿Recuerda algún acontecimiento familiar en la primavera de este año que pareciera afectar al señor Vanstone más de lo habitual?

La señorita Garth se inclinó y miró al señor Pendril con vehemencia.

- ¡El viaje a Londres! -exclamó-. ¡Desconfié del viaje a Londres desde el principio! ¡Sí! Recuerdo que el señor Vanstone recibió una carta; recuerdo que la leyó y se alteró tanto que nos sorprendió a todos.

- ¿Se fijó usted en que hubiera cierto entendimiento entre el señor y la señora Vanstone con respecto a esa carta?

- Sí, en efecto. Una de las chicas (fue Magdalen) mencionó el matasellos: algún lugar de América. Ahora lo recuerdo todo, señor Pendril. La señora Vanstone se mostró nerviosa e impaciente en cuanto oyó nombrar el sitio. Se fueron juntos a Londres al día siguiente; no dieron ninguna explicación a sus hijas ni a mí. La señora Vanstone dijo que el viaje estaba motivado por asuntos familiares. Sospeché que ocurría algo malo, no sabía el qué. La señora Vanstone me escribió desde Londres para decirme que el propósito del viaje era consultar a un médico sobre su estado de salud sin alarmar a sus hijas. En aquel momento la carta tenía algo que me dolió. Pensé que me estaba ocultando algún otro motivo. ¿Fui injusta con ella?

- No fue injusta con ella. Existía un motivo oculto. Al revelar ese motivo, revelo el penoso secreto que me trae a esta casa. Todo lo que podía hacer para prepararla ya está hecho. Permítame ahora que le diga la verdad en pocas y sencillas palabras. Cuando el señor y la señora Vanstone abandonaron Combe-Raven en marzo del presente año…

Antes de que pudiera completar la frase le interrumpió un súbito movimiento de la señorita Garth. Ésta se había sobresaltado violentamente y miraba hacia la ventana que tenía a su espalda.

- Es sólo el viento que mueve las hojas -dijo débilmente-. Tengo los nervios tan alterados que las cosas más nimias me sobresaltan. ¡Hable, por amor de Dios! Cuando el señor y la señora Vanstone abandonaron esta casa, dígamelo con claridad, ¿para qué fueron a Londres?

Con claridad contestó el señor Pendril:

- Fueron a Londres para casarse.

Al tiempo que respondía, colocó una hoja de papel sobre la mesa. Era el certificado de matrimonio de los difuntos padres, fechado el veinte de marzo de mil ochocientos cuarenta y seis.

La señorita Garth no se movió ni habló. El certificado permaneció delante de sus ojos sin que se fijara en él. Tenía la vista clavada en el rostro del abogado; estaba atónita, paralizada. El señor Pendril vio que todos sus esfuerzos por amortiguar el golpe del descubrimiento habían sido en vano; comprendió la vital importancia de sacarla de aquel estado y repitió las palabras fatídicas con toda claridad y firmeza.

- Fueron a Londres a casarse -dijo-. Intente recobrarse, intente asimilar primero los hechos sin adornos; la explicación vendrá después. ¡Señorita Garth, le estoy diciendo la triste verdad! En la primavera de este año salieron de esta casa; vivieron en Londres durante una quincena en la más estricta intimidad; se casaron por lo civil al final de ese período. Aquí está la copia del certificado que yo mismo obtuve el pasado lunes. Lea usted la fecha del matrimonio. Es el viernes, veinte de marzo, de marzo del presente año.

Cuando señalaba el certificado, aquel débil soplo de aire que había movido los arbustos de debajo de la ventana sobresaltando a la señorita Garth agitó las hojas una vez más. Esta vez también lo oyó él, y volvió el rostro para que la brisa lo bañara. No le llegó brisa alguna; ningún soplo de aire con fuerza suficiente para ser advertido penetró en la habitación.

La señorita Garth salió de su ensimismamiento y leyó el certificado como una autómata. No pareció producir impresión alguna en ella; lo apartó a un lado con actitud de perplejidad.

- Doce años -dijo en voz baja, con tono de desesperación-, doce felices y tranquilos años he vivido con esta familia. La señora Vanstone era amiga mía; mi querida y apreciada amiga, mi hermana, casi podría decir. No lo puedo creer. Tenga paciencia conmigo, señor, aún no lo puedo creer.

- La ayudaré a creerlo cuando le cuente el resto -dijo el señor Pendril-. Me comprenderá mejor cuando la haga retroceder a la época de la juventud del señor Vanstone. No pido su atención de momento. Esperemos un poco hasta que se recupere usted.

Aguardaron unos minutos. El abogado se sacó unas cartas del bolsillo, las consultó detenidamente y volvió a guardarlas.

- ¿Podrá escucharme ahora? -preguntó amablemente. Ella asintió. El señor Pendril reflexionó unos instantes-. Debo advertirle una cosa -dijo-. Si el aspecto del carácter del señor Vanstone que voy a presentar ahora parece contradecirse con la experiencia que tiene usted de él, recuerde que cuando usted lo conoció, hace doce años, él era un hombre de cuarenta, y que cuando lo conocí yo era un muchacho de diecinueve.

Sus siguientes palabras descorrieron el velo y mostraron el pasado irrevocable.

CAPÍTULO XIII

- La fortuna que poseía el señor Vanstone cuando usted lo conoció -empezó el abogado- era parte, y sólo parte, de la herencia que recibió a la muerte de su padre. El señor Vanstone padre era un industrial del norte de Inglaterra. Se casó muy joven y los hijos del matrimonio fueron seis o siete, no estoy seguro. El primogénito, Michael, vive aún y es un anciano que ha cumplido los setenta. La segunda, Selina, la hija mayor, casó ya en la madurez y murió hace diez u once años. Después vinieron otros hijos e hijas cuyas muertes prematuras hacen innecesario que dé más detalles. El último de todos los hijos, y menor en muchos años, fue Andrew, al que conocí, como ya he dicho, cuando tenía diecinueve. Mi padre estaba entonces a punto de retirarse del ejercicio activo de su profesión y, al sucederle en su trabajo, heredé también su relación con los Vanstone como abogado de la familia.

»En aquella época, Andrew acababa de emprender su vida de adulto ingresando en el ejército. Tras poco más de un año de servicio en el país, su regimiento fue destinado a Canadá. Cuando abandonó Inglaterra, su padre y su hermano mayor, Michael, tenían serias desavenencias. No voy a entretenerla a usted entrando en la causa de la disputa. Baste decir que el señor Vanstone padre, pese a sus muchas y excelentes cualidades, era un hombre de carácter violento e intratable. Su primogénito le había desafiado en circunstancias que tal vez sólo hubieran irritado a un padre de carácter más suave, pero éste declaró categóricamente que no quería volver a ver a Michael nunca más. Haciendo caso omiso de mis ruegos y de los de su esposa, rompió en nuestra presencia el testamento por el que Michael recibía su parte de la herencia paterna. Tal era la situación familiar cuando el hijo menor partió para Canadá.

»Unos meses después de la llegada de su regimiento a Québec, Andrew conoció a una mujer muy atractiva que procedía, o afirmaba proceder, de uno de los estados sureños de América. De inmediato consiguió ejercer una gran influencia sobre él, utilizándola con el propósito más vil. Usted conocía la naturaleza afable, afectuosa y confiada del señor Vanstone en su madurez, no le costará nada imaginar hasta qué punto actuó de manera irreflexiva bajo los impulsos de la juventud. Huelga detenerse en esta lamentable parte de la historia. No tenía más que veintiún años, estaba ciegamente enamorado de una mujer indigna, y ella le sedujo con implacable astucia hasta que fue demasiado tarde para dar marcha atrás. En pocas palabras, cometió el error fatal de su vida: se casó con ella.

»Velando por sus propios intereses, ella tuvo la suficiente inteligencia para temer la influencia de los camaradas oficiales de Andrew y para convencerle de que guardaran secreto sobre su intención de casarse hasta el mismo día de la boda. Eso lo consiguió, pero no pudo prever los efectos de la casualidad. Apenas habían transcurrido tres meses cuando una revelación casual puso al descubierto la vida que había llevado antes del matrimonio. Al marido no le quedaba más que una alternativa: la de separarse inmediatamente de ella.

»El efecto del descubrimiento en el desdichado muchacho, pues su disposición era aún la de un muchacho, puede juzgarse por el suceso que le siguió. Uno de los oficiales superiores de Andrew (un tal comandante Kirke, si mal no recuerdo) lo encontró en sus habitaciones escribiendo a su padre una confesión de la vergonzosa verdad, con una pistola cargada al lado. Aquel oficial salvó al muchacho del suicidio y echó tierra sobre el escandaloso asunto gracias a una solución de compromiso. Dado que el matrimonio era totalmente legal y que la mala conducta de la esposa era previa a la boda, lo que no daba derecho al marido a reclamar el divorcio, la única posibilidad consistía en favorecer los intereses de aquella mujer. Se le garantizó una considerable pensión anual con la condición de que volviera al lugar del que había salido, que no apareciera jamás en Inglaterra y que dejara de usar el apellido del marido. Se estipularon además otras condiciones. Ella las aceptó todas, y se tomaron medidas en privado para tenerla bien vigilada en el lugar de su retiro. No puedo decirle qué vida llevó allí ni si cumplió todas la condiciones que le impusieron. Sólo puedo decirle que jamás vino a Inglaterra que yo

sepa, que jamás molestó al señor Vanstone y que se le pagó hasta el día de su muerte la pensión anual a través de un representante en América. Lo único que ella quería de él al casarse era dinero, y dinero fue lo que tuvo.

»Mientras tanto, Andrew había abandonado el regimiento. Nada consiguió persuadirle de que se enfrentara con sus camaradas oficiales después de lo ocurrido. Presentó la renuncia y volvió a Inglaterra. La primera noticia que le llegó a su regreso fue el fallecimiento de su padre. Vino a mi despacho de Londres antes de volver a casa y allí supo de mis propios labios cómo había terminado la disputa familiar.

»El testamento que el señor Vanstone padre había destruido en mi presencia no había sido reemplazado por otro, que yo supiera. Cuando me mandaron llamar tras su muerte, como es lo habitual, no cabía la menor duda de que la ley tendría que realizar la acostumbrada división entre la viuda y los hijos. Con gran sorpresa por mi parte, apareció un testamento entre sus papeles, correctamente redactado y legalizado, y fechado aproximadamente una semana después del día en que se había destruido el primero. El señor Vanstone padre había mantenido su afán de venganza contra el hijo mayor y había recurrido a un extraño para que le asistiera profesionalmente en lo que con sinceridad creo que le daba vergüenza pedirme a mí.

»Es innecesario que la moleste ahora detallándole las disposiciones del testamento, cuyo fin era asegurar el porvenir de una viuda y tres hijos. La viuda recibió tan sólo un interés vitalicio sobre una parte de los bienes del testador; la parte restante se dividía entre Andrew y Selina: dos tercios para el hermano y un tercio para la hermana. A la muerte de la madre, el dinero del que saldría su renta pasaría a Andrew y Selina en la misma proporción, después de que de la suma total se dedujeran cinco mil libras que se pagarían a Michael como único legado del implacable padre a su primogénito.

»En números redondos, la división de la propiedad tal como establecía el testamento quedó como sigue. Antes de la muerte de su madre, Andrew tenía setenta mil libras, Selina tenía treinta y cinco mil libras y Michael nada. Tras la muerte de la madre, Michael tenía cinco mil libras, frente a la herencia de Andrew, que había aumentado hasta cien mil libras, y la herencia de Selina, que había alcanzado las cincuenta mil. No crea que me entretengo innecesariamente en esta parte de la historia. Cada una de mis palabras se refiere a intereses aún por desvelar que tienen una importancia capital para las hijas del señor Vanstone. A medida que vayamos pasando del pasado al presente recuerde la tremenda desigualdad de la herencia de Michael con respecto a la de Andrew. Me temo que el daño causado por aquel testamento vengativo aún no haya acabado.

»El primer impulso de Andrew cuando oyó las noticias que yo le daba fue digno de su naturaleza abierta y generosa. De inmediato propuso dividir la herencia con su hermano mayor. Pero existía un grave obstáculo en el camino. En mi despacho le aguardaba una carta de Michael, y en esa carta le acusaba de ser la causa original del distanciamiento entre el padre y su primogénito. Los esfuerzos realizados por Andrew -reconozco que de una manera demasiado directa e imprudente, pero sé que con la más pura y la mejor de las intenciones- para acabar con la disputa antes de marcharse Canadá fueron distorsionados por la más vil tergiversación con el fin de apoyar un reproche de traición y falsedad que hubiera herido a cualquier hombre en lo más vivo. A Andrew le pareció lo mismo que a mí: que si no se retiraban aquellas imputaciones antes de que se llevaran a cabo los generosos propósitos que tenía hacia su hermano, el mero hecho de beneficiarle equivaldría prácticamente a reconocer que la acusación de Michael era justa. Escribió una carta a su hermano en los términos más indulgentes. La respuesta fue todo lo ofensiva que permiten las palabras. Michael había heredado el temperamento de su padre sin que lo compensaran sus mejores cualidades; en su segunda carta reiteraba las acusaciones de la primera y declaraba que sólo aceptaría la división propuesta como un acto de reparación por parte de Andrew. A continuación escribí a la madre para que intercediera. Ella misma se sentía agraviada por no haber recibido más que un interés vitalicio sobre parte de los bienes de su marido; se puso decididamente del lado de Michael y estigmatizó la propuesta de Andrew como un intento de sobornar a su hijo primogénito para que retirara una acusación contra su hermano que ese hermano sabía que era cierta. Tras este último rechazo nada más se

podía hacer. Michael se retiró al Continente y su madre le siguió hasta allí. La madre vivió aún muchos años y ahorró el dinero suficiente de su renta para aumentar considerablemente las cinco mil libras de su primogénito. Michael había mejorado previamente su situación pecuniaria contrayendo un matrimonio ventajoso, y ahora lo que le queda de vida lo reparte entre Francia y Suiza, viudo y con un hijo. Volveremos a él dentro de poco. Mientras tanto, y para concluir, sólo decirle que Andrew y Michael no volvieron a verse, ni se comunicaron nunca más, ni siquiera por carta. A todos los efectos, estuvieron muertos el uno para el otro desde aquella época hasta el momento presente.

«Ahora podrá calibrar usted cuál era la situación de Andrew cuando abandonó su profesión y regresó a Inglaterra. Poseedor de una fortuna, estaba solo en el mundo; su futuro destruido desde el inicio de su vida; distanciado de su madre y su hermano; con una hermana casada en la madurez cuyos intereses y esperanzas nada tenían que ver con él. En una situación como la suya, hombres de un fuste intelectual más firme tal vez hubieran hallado refugio en una absorbente actividad mental. Él no era capaz de tal esfuerzo; toda la fortaleza de su carácter estribaba en los afectos desperdiciados. Su lugar en el mundo era ese tranquilo hogar con esposa e hijos que hicieran su vida dichosa, precisamente el que había perdido para siempre. No osaba mirar hacia atrás. No podía mirar hacia delante. Desesperado, se dejó llevar por su impetuosa juventud y se sumergió en la más baja disipación de la vida londinense.

»La falsedad de una mujer le había conducido a la ruina. El amor de una mujer le salvó en los comienzos de su decadencia. No hablemos de ella con dureza, pues la depositamos ayer junto a él en la tumba.

»Usted, que sólo conoció a la señora Vanstone en los últimos años, cuando la enfermedad, la pena y la secreta preocupación la habían alterado y entristecido, no puede hacerse una idea exacta del atractivo de su persona y su carácter cuando era una joven de diecisiete años. Yo estaba con Andrew cuando se conocieron. Intentaba apartarle, por una noche al menos, de compañías y placeres degradantes convenciéndole para que me acompañara al baile que daba una de las grandes firmas de la City. Allí se vieron por primera vez. Ella le causó una honda impresión desde el momento en que la vio. Para mí, como para él, era una completa desconocida. Al conseguir que le fuera presentada de la forma habitual, supo que era la hija de un tal señor Blake. El resto se lo dijo ella misma. Fueron pareja de baile (en el atestado salón pasaron inadvertidos) durante toda la velada.

»Las circunstancias estaban en contra de ella desde el principio. Era desgraciada en su hogar. Sus familiares y allegados no ocupaban un lugar relevante en la sociedad; eran personas de baja condición, indignas de ella en todos los aspectos. Era su primer baile; era la primera vez que conocía a un hombre con la educación, los modales y la conversación de un caballero. ¿Acaso no tengo derecho a excusarla? ¡Si sentimos algo de compasión por las debilidades humanas, desde luego que sí!

»El encuentro de aquella noche decidió el futuro de ambos. Cuando se hubieron producido otros encuentros, cuando la confesión del amor que ella le profesaba escapó de sus labios, Andrew tomó el camino (de una manera inocente, inconsciente) más peligroso de todos. Su franqueza y su sentido del honor no le permitían engañarla: le abrió su corazón y le contó la verdad. Ella era una joven generosa e impulsiva; sus vínculos familiares no eran lo bastante fuertes para retenerla; estaba apasionadamente enamorada de él, y Andrew había apelado a su piedad, que, para honra inmortal de las mujeres, es la apelación que más les cuesta resistir. La señora Vanstone (entonces señorita Blake) comprendió, con toda razón, que sólo ella se interponía entre él y la ruina. La última posibilidad de salvación dependía de su decisión. Decidió, y lo salvó.

»No me interprete mal; que no se me acuse de tratar frívolamente el grave problema social que me obliga a tratar mi narración. No defenderé la memoria de la señora Vanstone con falsos argumentos; sólo diré la verdad. Es cierto que ella lo apartó de los locos excesos que hubieran acabado en una muerte prematura. Es cierto que ella lo devolvió a esa feliz existencia hogareña que usted recuerda con afecto y que él recordó con una gratitud tal que la hizo su esposa en cuanto quedó libre. Que la moralidad

estricta reclame sus derechos y condene su primera falta. Verdaderamente de bien poco me habría servido leer el Nuevo Testamento si la misericordia cristiana no puede suavizar la dura condena contra ella, si la caridad cristiana no encuentra una disculpa a su memoria en el amor y la fidelidad, en el sufrimiento y el sacrificio de toda su vida.

»Unas cuantas palabras más nos llevarán a una época posterior y a sucesos que usted misma ha conocido.

»No necesito recordarle que la posición en la que se hallaba el señor Vanstone en aquel momento no podía conducir más que a un resultado final: la revelación, más o menos inevitable, de la verdad. Se intentó mantener en secreto la desgracia de su vida para la familia de la señorita Blake y, por supuesto, esos intentos fracasaron ante el implacable escrutinio del padre y los allegados de la joven. No puedo decirle qué habría ocurrido si sus parientes hubieran sido lo que se dice «respetables». Lo cierto es que eran personas con las que se podía negociar a conveniencia (como vulgarmente se dice). El único superviviente de la familia en la actualidad es un sinvergüenza que se llama a sí mismo capitán Wragge. Cuando le diga que este capitán Wragge la extorsionó, obligándola a pagar por su silencio hasta el final, y cuando añada que su conducta no era una excepción extraordinaria a la conducta de los demás parientes cuando vivían, comprenderá el tipo de gente con el que tuve que tratar en beneficio de mi cliente y cómo fue aplacada su fingida indignación.

»Tras abandonar Inglaterra en primera instancia en dirección a Irlanda, el señor Vanstone y la señorita Blake permanecieron allí durante unos cuantos años. Pese a su juventud, ella asumió sin pestañear su posición y las necesidades que ésta implicaba. Una vez decidida a sacrificar su vida al hombre que amaba, una vez acallada su conciencia con la convicción personal de que el matrimonio del señor Vanstone era una pantomima legal y de que ella era «su esposa a los ojos de Dios», se propuso desde un principio cumplir el.objetivo primordial de vivir con él a los ojos del mundo de tal manera que jamás despertaran la sospecha de que no era su esposa legal. Pocas son verdaderamente las mujeres que no saben decidir con firmeza, planear con paciencia y actuar con prontitud cuando están en juego sus intereses más queridos. La señora Vanstone (recuerde que ahora tiene derecho a ese nombre), la señora Vanstone superaba a la mayoría de las mujeres en tenacidad y tacto, y tomó en aquellos primeros tiempos todas las precauciones necesarias que la capacidad menos despierta de su marido no tenía el arte de concebir, precauciones a las que debieron en gran medida el mantenimiento de su secreto en épocas posteriores.

»Gracias a esta protección, ni una sombra de sospecha los siguió hasta aquí cuando regresaron a Inglaterra. Primero se establecieron en Devonshire, sencillamente porque allí se hallaban más lejos del condado del norte en el que se conocía a la familia del señor Vanstone y su historia. Por parte de los parientes vivos del señor Vanstone no tenían que temer indagaciones curiosas. Se había distanciado por completo de su madre y de su hermano. El marido de su hermana (que era clérigo) le había prohibido que mantuviera ningún tipo de contacto con él desde el período de su vida en que había caído en la deplorable disipación que adoptó al volver de Canadá, como he descrito. No tenía más parientes. Cuando él y la señorita Blake abandonaron Devonshire, su siguiente residencia fue esta casa. Sin buscar ni evitar el trato; felices con su vida común, sus hijos y su tranquila vida rural; sin que los vecinos que formaban su modesto círculo de relaciones sospecharan en modo alguno que fueran más que lo que aparentaban ser, la verdad en su caso, como en el de tantos otros, siguió siendo un secreto hasta que un accidente la sacó a la luz.

»Si, por la íntima relación que tenía con ellos, le parece extraño que no se traicionaran jamás a sí mismos, le ruego que considere las circunstancias y comprenderá entonces la aparente anomalía. Recuerde que habían estado viviendo como marido y mujer a todos los efectos (salvo que no habían celebrado la ceremonia de la boda) durante quince años antes de que usted entrara en esta casa, y no olvide tampoco que no ocurrió suceso alguno que perturbara la felicidad del señor Vanstone en el presente, ni que le recordara el pasado ni le advirtiera del futuro, hasta que llegó la noticia de la muerte de su esposa en aquella carta de América que vio usted en su mano. A partir de aquel día - cuando él se vio obligado a recordar un pasado que aborrecía, cuando ella tuvo al

alcance de la mano un futuro que jamás se había atrevido a esperar-, pronto se dará usted cuenta, si no lo ha hecho ya, ambos se traicionaron a sí mismos una y otra vez, y sólo el hecho de que usted y sus hijas no tuvieran la más mínima sospecha evitó que descubrieran la verdad.

»Conoce usted ahora la triste historia del pasado tan bien como yo. He tenido que decir palabras muy duras. Dios sabe que las he pronunciado con sincera compasión hacia los vivos y sincero aprecio por la memoria de los muertos.

Hizo una pausa, volvió un poco el rostro y apoyó la cabeza en la mano con la actitud serena y reservada que era propia de él. Hasta entonces la señorita Garth sólo había interrumpido su relato con alguna que otra palabra o una muda muestra de atención. No hizo esfuerzos por disimular las lágrimas, que le caían rápidas y silenciosas por las mejillas ajadas cuando alzó la vista y habló.

- Le he ofendido, señor, de pensamiento -dijo con noble sencillez-. Ahora le conozco mejor. Permítame pedirle perdón; permítame cogerle la mano.

Estas palabras y el gesto que las acompañó conmovieron al señor Pendril profundamente. Cogió la mano de la señorita Garth sin decir nada. Ella fue la primera en hablar, la primera en dar ejemplo de autodominio. Uno de los nobles instintos de la mujer es que no hay nada que la induzca a luchar contra su propia aflicción con mayor éxito que la visión de la congoja de un hombre. La señorita Garth se enjugó las lágrimas tranquilamente, y tranquilamente movió su silla para sentarse más cerca de él antes de hablar.

- Lo que ha ocurrido en esta casa, señor Pendril, ha supuesto una dolorosa conmoción para mí -dijo-; de lo contrario habría soportado lo que acaba de contarme con mayor entereza de la que he demostrado hoy. ¿Me permitirá hacerle una pregunta antes de que prosiga? Mi corazón sufre por las hijas de mi amo, ahora mis hijas más que nunca. ¿No hay esperanzas para su futuro? ¿No les queda otra perspectiva que la pobreza?

El abogado vaciló antes de contestar.

- Les queda la dependencia -dijo al fin- de la justicia y la clemencia de un extraño.

- ¿Por el infortunio de su nacimiento?

- Por los infortunios que han seguido al matrimonio de sus padres.

Tras esta sorprendente respuesta se levantó, cogió el testamento del suelo y lo colocó de nuevo sobre la mesa, entre ambos.

- Sólo puedo presentarle la verdad -prosiguió- en términos sencillos. El matrimonio ha destruido este testamento y las hijas del señor Vanstone dependen ahora de su tío.

Mientras hablaba, la brisa agitó de nuevo los arbustos bajo la ventana.

- ¿De su tío? -repitió la señorita Garth. Reflexionó unos instantes y de repente puso la mano sobre el brazo del señor Pendril-. ¡No se referirá a Michael Vanstone!

- Sí, a Michael Vanstone.

La mano de la señorita Garth seguía aferrando el brazo del abogado mecánicamente. Todos sus pensamientos estaban concentrados en el esfuerzo de asimilar el descubrimiento que acababa de hacer.

- ¡De Michael Vanstone! -se dijo-. Del enemigo más acérrimo de su padre. ¿Cómo es posible?

- Présteme atención unos minutos más -dijo el señor Pendril- y lo sabrá. Cuanto antes pongamos fin a esta dolorosa entrevista, antes podré ponerme en contacto con el señor

Michael Vanstone y antes sabrá usted qué decide hacer por las hijas huérfanas de su hermano. Le repito que dependen por completo de él. Para que comprenda más fácilmente el cómo y el porqué, retomaremos la sucesión de acontecimientos donde la habíamos dejado: en el momento de la boda del señor y la señora Vanstone.

- Un momento, señor -dijo la señorita Garth-. ¿Estaba usted al corriente de esa boda cuando se llevó a cabo?

- Desgraciadamente, no. Me hallaba lejos de Londres, lejos de Inglaterra, en aquella época. Si el señor Vanstone hubiera podido ponerse en contacto conmigo cuando la carta de América le comunicó la muerte de su esposa, la fortuna de sus hijas no se hallaría ahora en juego.

Hizo una pausa y, antes de proseguir, volvió a echar un vistazo a las cartas que había consultado antes. Cogió una de las cartas y la colocó sobre la mesa, a su lado.

- A principios de este año -continuó-, un grave asunto relacionado con la propiedad de un viejo cliente y amigo en las Indias Occidentales requirió mi presencia, o la de uno de mis socios, en Jamaica. Uno de los dos era necesario aquí y el estado de salud del otro no le permitía viajar. No tuve más remedio que ir yo. Escribí al señor Vanstone diciéndole que habría de abandonar Inglaterra a finales de febrero y que la índole del asunto que me llevaba a las Indias Occidentales no me permitía esperar la vuelta antes de junio. No tenía ningún motivo especial para escribirle. Sencillamente me pareció lo correcto, dado que mis socios no conocían los asuntos privados del señor Vanstone como yo, advertirle de mi ausencia como una adecuada medida de precaución formal. Abandoné Inglaterra a finales de febrero sin haber recibido noticias de él. Me hallaba en alta mar cuando le llegó la noticia de la muerte de su esposa el cuatro de marzo, y no regresé hasta mediados de junio.

- Le advirtió de su partida -interpuso la señorita Garth-. ¿No le advirtió de su regreso?

- No lo hice personalmente. Mi pasante principal le envió una de las circulares que despachó el bufete para anunciar mi regreso. Fue lo primero que se me ocurrió para reemplazar la carta personal que no tuve tiempo de escribir debido a la presión de las innumerables ocupaciones que se me habían acumulado tras mi larga ausencia. Apenas un mes más tarde, me comunicó por carta la noticia de su boda. Estaba escrita el día del fatal accidente. Las circunstancias que le indujeron a escribirla surgieron a raíz de un suceso por el que usted debió de tener cierto interés. Me refiero al idilio del hijo del señor Clare y la hija menor del señor Vanstone.

- Debo decir que no vi con buenos ojos ese enamoramiento en un principio -dijo la señorita Garth-. Ignoraba entonces el secreto de la familia; ahora lo comprendo.

- Exactamente. El motivo que comprende usted ahora es el que nos lleva a la cuestión principal. La joven (según me ha contado el señor Clare padre, a quien debo el conocimiento de los hechos con detalle) confesó su enamoramiento a su padre, e inocentemente le hirió en lo más hondo al referirse por casualidad a la época en que él era joven. El señor Vanstone mantuvo una larga conversación con su mujer en la cual convinieron que debían informar confidencialmente al señor Clare de la verdad antes de permitir que el enamoramiento entre los jóvenes fuera más lejos. Fue extremadamente doloroso tanto para el marido como para la mujer verse reducidos a esa alternativa. Pero estaban decididos, como personas honorables, a sacrificar sus propios sentimientos. El señor Vanstone se dirigió en el acto a la casa del señor Clare. Sin duda observó usted un extraordinario cambio en los modales del señor Vanstone ese día y comprende ahora la razón.

La señorita Garth inclinó la cabeza y el señor Pendril continuó.

- Conoce usted de sobra el desprecio del señor Clare hacia todos los prejuicios sociales -dijo- para imaginar cómo recibió la confesión de su vecino. Cinco minutos después de que se iniciara la entrevista, los dos viejos amigos se sentían tan cómodos y libres el uno con el otro como siempre. Durante su conversación, el señor Vanstone mencionó el

arreglo pecuniario que había realizado en beneficio de su hija y del futuro marido, y entonces, naturalmente, se refirió al testamento que se halla ahora encima de esta mesa. Recordando que su amigo se había casado en el mes de marzo de este año, el señor Clare preguntó de inmediato cuándo se había redactado el testamento; recibió la respuesta de que se había hecho cinco años atrás, e inmediatamente dejó atónito al señor Vanstone diciéndole sin rodeos que el documento era papel mojado a los ojos de la ley. Hasta ese momento el señor Vanstone, como tantas otras personas, ignoraba por completo que el matrimonio de un hombre se considera el acontecimiento más importante de su vida, tanto a nivel social como legal, y que invalida cualquier testamento que hubiera redactado como soltero, así como hace absolutamente necesaria la reafirmación de sus intenciones testamentarias como hombre casado. La exposición de este sencillo hecho pareció abrumar al señor Vanstone. Tras manifestar que debía a su amigo un favor que recordaría hasta el día de su muerte, abandonó al punto su casa, regresó a Combe-Raven inmediatamente y me escribió esta carta.

El abogado tendió la carta abierta a la señorita Garth. Con un dolor mudo y sin lágrimas, ella leyó estas palabras:

Mi querido señor Pendril, desde que nos escribimos por última vez se ha producido un extraordinario cambio en mi vida. Aproximadamente una semanas después de su partida, recibí noticia de América de que era libre. ¿Necesito decirle qué uso hice de esa libertad? ¿Necesito decirle que la madre de mis hijas es ahora mi esposa?

Si le sorprende no haber recibido noticias mías en el momento mismo en que regresó, atribuya mi silencio en gran parte, si no toda, a mi total ignorancia sobre la necesidad legal de hacer otro testamento. Hace apenas media hora que lo he descubierto (en circunstancias que le relataré cuando nos veamos) gracias a mi viejo amigo el señor Clare. Ciertas preocupaciones familiares han contribuido también a mi silencio. Mi mujer está a punto de dar a luz; además de esta grave preocupación, mi segunda hija acaba de comprometerse. Hasta que hoy he visto al señor Clare, tales asuntos ocupaban mis pensamientos hasta tal punto que ni siquiera se me ha ocurrido escribirle durante el corto mes transcurrido desde que me enteré de su vuelta. Ahora que sé que debo rehacer mi testamento, le escribo al instante. Por amor de Dios, venga el mismo día en que reciba esta carta; venga y líbreme del horrible pensamiento de que mis dos queridas hijas se hallan desamparadas en este momento. Si algo me ocurriera y mi deseo de hacer justicia a su madre acabara (debido a mi lamentable desconocimiento de la ley) dejando a Norah y a Magdalen desheredadas, ¡no podría descansar en la tumba! Venga sin demora, suyo siempre.

- El sábado por la mañana -prosiguió el señor Pendril-, llegaron estas líneas. Al instante dejé de lado todos los demás asuntos y tomé un coche para ir a la estación. En la terminal de Londres oí la primera noticia sobre el accidente del viernes, pero los detalles sobre el número de pasajeros muertos y sus nombres eran contradictorios. En Bristol estaban mejor informados y se confirmó la terrible verdad sobre el señor Vanstone. Tuve tiempo para recobrarme antes de llegar a la estación de aquí, donde encontré al hijo del señor Clare esperando. Me llevó a la casa de su padre, y allí, sin perder un momento, redacté el testamento de la señora Vanstone. Mi propósito era garantizar la única herencia para sus hijas que era ya posible. Habiendo muerto sin testar, un tercio de la fortuna del señor Vanstone iría a parar a su viuda y el resto se dividiría entre sus parientes. Como progenie nacida fuera del matrimonio, las hijas del señor Vanstone, dadas las circunstancias de la muerte de su padre, tenían tanto derecho a una parte de sus bienes como las hijas de uno de sus labradores. La única opción posible era que su madre se recobrara lo suficiente para dejarles por testamento su tercio en herencia en caso de fallecer. Ahora sabe usted por qué le escribí para pedir la entrevista, por qué aguardé día y noche con la esperanza de recibir su llamada. Lamenté sinceramente responder a las preguntas de su nota del modo en que me vi obligado a hacerlo. Pero mientras existiera la posibilidad de que la señora Vanstone viviera, el secreto de su matrimonio era suyo, no mío, y la delicadeza me impedía desvelarlo.

- Hizo usted bien, señor -dijo la señorita Garth-. Comprendo sus motivos y los respeto.

- Mi último intento por ayudar a las hijas -prosiguió el señor Pendril-, como usted sabe, resultó infructuoso debido a la peligrosa naturaleza de la enfermedad de la señora Vanstone. Su muerte dejó al niño que le sobrevivió unas pocas horas (el niño que, recuerde, nació dentro del matrimonio legal) como único poseedor del total de la fortuna del señor Vanstone. A la muerte del niño (aunque hubiera sobrevivido a la madre unos segundos en lugar de unas horas, el resultado hubiera sido el mismo), el dinero pasó al pariente más cercano del niño, y ese pariente es el tío paterno del niño, Michael Vanstone. La fortuna de ochenta mil libras ha pasado prácticamente a sus manos.

- ¿No hay otros parientes? -preguntó la señorita Garth-. ¿No hay esperanza en algún otro lado?

- No hay parientes con los mismos derechos que Michael Vanstone -dijo el abogado-. No viven ni abuelos ni abuelas del niño muerto (ni por parte de padre ni de madre). No era probable que vivieran, considerando la edad del señor y la señora Vanstone al morir. Es una desgracia que también debamos lamentar que no vivan otros tíos o tías. Existen unos primos, el hijo y las dos hijas de esa hermana mayor del señor Vanstone que se casó con el archidiácono Bartram, y que murió, como ya le he dicho, hace unos cuantos años, pero su grado de parentesco es más lejano. No, señorita Garth, debemos enfrentarnos con la cruda realidad. Las hijas del señor Vanstone no son hijas de nadie, y la ley las deja desvalidas a merced de su tío.

- Una ley cruel, señor Pendril, una ley cruel en un país cristiano.

- Aun siendo cruel, señorita Garth, tiene la excusa de la extraordinaria singularidad de este caso. Lejos está de mi ánimo defender la ley de Inglaterra en lo que concierne a los hijos ilegítimos. Muy al contrario, considero que es una vergüenza para la nación. Castiga a los hijos por los pecados de los padres; alienta el vicio al privar a padres y madres del más importante de los motivos para expiar su culpa mediante el matrimonio, y afirma producir esos dos abominables resultados en nombre de la moralidad y la religión. Sin embargo, no es responsable de un rigor excepcional en el caso de estas desventuradas muchachas. La ley de otros países, más compasiva y cristiana, permite hacer legítimos a los hijos mediante el matrimonio de los padres, pero tampoco se

compadecería de estas criaturas. El hecho de que su padre estuviera casado cuando conoció a su madre las ha convertido en parias a los ojos de la sociedad, negándoles el amparo de la ley civil en Europa. Le digo la verdad desnuda, de nada serviría disfrazarla. No hay la menor esperanza si miramos hacia el pasado; podría haberla si miramos hacia el futuro. El mejor servicio que puedo prestarle ahora es acortar el período de incertidumbre. Volveré a Londres en menos de una hora. A mi llegada, averiguaré inmediatamente el medio más rápido de comunicarme con el señor Michael Vanstone y le haré saber a usted el resultado. Por triste que sea la situación de las hermanas en este momento, debemos verla desde su aspecto más positivo; no debemos perder la esperanza.

- ¿Esperanza? -repitió la señorita Garth-. ¿Esperanza en Michael Vanstone?

- Sí, esperanza en la influencia del tiempo, ya que no de la compasión. Como ya le he explicado, el señor Vanstone es ahora un anciano; naturalmente no puede esperar vivir mucho más. Treinta años lo separan de la época en la que su hermano y él tuvieron su primera discrepancia. Qué duda cabe de que esos años son una influencia que ha de aplacar a cualquier hombre. Qué duda cabe de que el conocimiento de las increíbles circunstancias en las que ha entrado en posesión de la herencia servirán de atenuante, aunque falle todo lo demás.

- Intentaré pensar como usted, señor Pendril; intentaré esperar lo mejor. ¿Tardaremos mucho en conocer su decisión y despejar nuestras dudas?

- Confío en que no. La única demora por mi parte será la debida a la necesidad de averiguar en qué lugar del Continente reside Michael Vanstone. Creo que tengo el medio de solventar con éxito esa dificultad y lo llevaré a la práctica en cuanto llegue a Londres.

El abogado cogió el sombrero; luego regresó a la mesa donde yacía la última carta del padre y su inútil testamento, uno al lado del otro. Tras unos instantes de reflexión, depositó ambos en manos de la señorita Garth.

- Tal vez le sea más fácil desvelar la cruda realidad a las hermanas huérfanas -dijo a su modo tranquilo y contenido- si ven cómo se refiere su padre a ellas en el testamento, si leen la carta que me dirigió, la última que pudo escribir. Que sean éstas las pruebas de que su padre vivía para reparar el perjuicio causado a sus hijas. «Puede que piensen con amargura en su nacimiento -me dijo cuando redacté este testamento inútil-, pero jamás pensarán con amargura en mí. Jamás les llevaré la contraria, jamás padecerán una pena que yo pueda evitarles, ni una necesidad que yo no satisfaga». Me hizo escribir esas palabras en el testamento para que hablaran en su defensa cuando la verdad que había ocultado a sus hijas en vida les fuera revelada tras su muerte. Ninguna ley puede privar a sus hijas del legado de su arrepentimiento y de su amor. Le dejo a usted el testamento y la carta como ayuda; a usted se los confío.

El señor Pendril notó que esta su última bondad la había conmovido y tuvo la atención de apresurar la despedida. Ella cogió una de sus manos entre las suyas y musitó entrecortadamente unas palabras de gratitud.

- Puede estar segura de que haré cuanto esté en mi mano -dijo él, y dándose la vuelta con compasiva aspereza, se fue. Había llegado bajo el sol radiante para revelar la fatídica verdad. Abandonó la casa bajo el sol radiante, una vez desvelada esa verdad.

CAPÍTULO XIV

Era casi la una de la tarde cuando el señor Pendril salió de la casa. La señorita Garth volvió a sentarse, sola, e intentó afrontar la obligación que las revelaciones de la mañana le habían impuesto.

No tuvo ánimos para ello. Procuró aliviar el nerviosismo, olvidar la situación en que se encontraba, abstraerse de sus pensamientos, al menos durante unos minutos. Después de un rato, abrió la carta del señor Vanstone y se dispuso a leerla una vez más de forma mecánica.

Una a una, las últimas palabras del difunto atrajeron su atención con firmeza creciente. La profunda soledad, el ininterrumpido silencio hicieron efecto en sus pensamientos y los abrieron a esas impresiones del pasado y del presente que más deseaba evitar. Cuando llegó a las melancólicas líneas con que concluía la carta, se encontró a sí misma -de manera insensible, casi inconsciente al principio- remontándose en la trágica cadena de acontecimientos, eslabón a eslabón hasta llegar a su inicio con el acuerdo de matrimonio entre Magdalen y Francis Clare.

Ese matrimonio había llevado al señor Vanstone a visitar a su viejo amigo con una confesión que de otro modo jamás hubiera escapado de sus labios. De esa entrevista surgió el descubrimiento que le llevó de nuevo a casa para escribir al abogado pidiéndole que acudiera. Esa petición, a su vez, había causado el inevitable adelanto del viaje del sábado al viernes, el viernes del fatídico accidente, el viernes en que se dirigió hacia la muerte. A su muerte siguió la segunda pérdida que había dejado la casa desolada; la desvalida situación de las hijas cuyo próspero futuro había sido su mayor preocupación; el descubrimiento del secreto que había abrumado a la señorita Garth por la mañana; la revelación que, más terrible aún, le habían encomendado transmitir a las hermanas huérfanas. Por primera vez vio la sucesión de acontecimientos en su conjunto, la vio tan claramente como el azul del cielo y el resplandor verde de los árboles a la luz del sol que brillaba fuera.

¿Cómo, cuándo podía decírselo? ¿Quién podía dirigirse a ellas para descubrirles su propia ilegitimidad cuando no hacía ni una semana que sus padres habían muerto? ¿Quién podía pronunciar las terribles palabras mientras las primeras lágrimas seguían húmedas en sus mejillas, cuando el primer dolor de la separación era más fuerte en sus corazones, cuando el recuerdo del funeral aún no sobrepasaba un día de existencia? No iba a ser la última amiga que les quedaba; no sería la leal mujer cuyo corazón sufría por ellas. ¡No! ¡Silencio por el momento, a toda costa, un compasivo silencio en muchos días!

Salió de la habitación con el testamento y la carta en la mano, con la natural piedad de un corazón humano que sellaba sus labios y cerraba con fuerza sus ojos al futuro. Se detuvo en el vestíbulo y escuchó. No se oía un solo ruido. Subió por las escaleras silenciosamente y pasó por delante del dormitorio de Norah de camino a su habitación. Le llegaron voces desde el interior, las voces de las dos hermanas. Tras unos instantes de reflexión, cambió de idea, dio media vuelta y bajó por las escaleras rápidamente. Tanto Norah como Magdalen estaban al tanto de la entrevista que había mantenido con el señor Pendril, pues había considerado que era su deber mostrarles la carta del abogado en la que pedía ser recibido. ¿No despertaría entonces sus sospechas si se encerraba en su habitación tan pronto como el abogado había abandonado la casa? La mano le tembló sobre la barandilla; notaba que el rostro podía traicionarla. La desinteresada fortaleza, que no la había abandonado jamás hasta ese día, había sufrido demasiadas pruebas, había traspasado su límite al fin.

En la puerta del vestíbulo volvió a reflexionar un momento y salió al jardín, dirigiendo sus pasos hacia un banco y una mesa rústicos situados entre los árboles, fuera de la vista de la casa. En épocas pasadas se había sentado allí a menudo con la señora Vanstone a un lado, Norah al otro y Magdalen y los perros correteando por la hierba.

Sola se sentó allí ahora con el testamento y la carta, de los que no se atrevía a desprenderse, con la cabeza inclinada sobre ellos y el rostro oculto entre las manos. Sola se sentó allí intentando hacer acopio de valor.

Le asaltaron dudas sobre los negros días que se avecinaban; se adueñó de ella el miedo a los peligros ocultos que su silencio podía deparar a Norah y a Magdalen en un futuro próximo. Una casualidad podía poner súbitamente la verdad al descubierto. El señor Pendril podía escribir, dirigirse personalmente a las hermanas con la natural convicción de que ella ya les hubiera informado. Podían surgirles complicaciones en cualquier momento; podían surgir necesidades imprevistas que las obligaran a abandonar la casa. La señorita Garth vio todos estos peligros, y aun así siguió faltándole el valor cruel para enfrentarse con lo peor y hablar. Al poco, el conflicto creciente de sus pensamientos buscó alivio manifestándose exteriormente tanto de palabra como de acto. Alzó la cabeza y golpeó la mesa con impotencia.

- ¡Que Dios me ayude, qué voy a hacer! -exclamó-. ¿Cómo voy a decírselo?

- No es necesario decírselo -replicó una voz a su espalda-. Ya lo saben.

La señorita Garth se puso en pie sobresaltada. Era Magdalen quien se hallaba ante ella, quien había pronunciado aquellas palabras.

Sí, allí estaba la grácil figura con su vestido de mañana, con su negra y alta silueta, inmóvil sobre un fondo frondoso. Era Magdalen en persona, con una tranquilidad pétrea en su rostro pálido, con una resignación glacial en sus serenos ojos grises.

- Ya lo sabemos -repitió con voz clara y comedida-. Las hijas del señor Vanstone no son hijas de nadie y la ley las deja desvalidas a merced de su tío.

De esta forma, sin una sola lágrima, sin que se le quebrara la voz, Magdalen repitió literalmente las palabras del abogado. La señorita Garth retrocedió un paso, tambaleante, y se agarró al banco para no caer. La cabeza le daba vueltas; cerró los ojos al sentir una momentánea debilidad. Cuando volvió a abrirlos, el brazo de Magdalen la sostenía, el aliento de Magdalen le abanicaba la mejilla, los labios fríos de Magdalen la besaban. Ella rehuyó el beso; el tacto de los labios de la joven la llenó de terror. Formuló la pregunta inevitable en cuanto fue capaz de hablar.

- Nos has oído -dijo-. ¿Dónde estabas?

- Debajo de la ventana abierta.

- ¿Todo el tiempo?

- De principio a fin.

Magdalen había escuchado, aquella joven de dieciocho años en la primera semana de su orfandad había escuchado la terrible revelación de labios del abogado, palabra por palabra, ¡sin traicionarse en ningún momento! ¡Durante toda la entrevista había sido lo bastante precavida para que los únicos y leves movimientos que podían delatarla se confundieran por entre las hojas con el paso de la brisa estival!

- No intente hablar aún -dijo Magdalen con tono más suave y amable-. No me mire con esa expresión de duda. ¿Qué mal he hecho? Cuando el señor Pendril quiso hablar con usted sobre Norah y sobre mí, su carta nos dejaba elegir si queríamos estar o no presentes. ¿Cómo podía yo asistir a la entrevista, si mi hermana mayor decidía no ir? ¿Cómo podía oír mi propia historia sino como lo he hecho? Ningún mal he causado escuchando, sino un bien. La he salvado a usted de la angustia de tener que contárnoslo. Ya ha sufrido bastante por nosotras; ha llegado el momento de que aprendamos a sufrir solas. Yo he aprendido. Norah está aprendiendo.

- ¡Norah!

- Sí. He hecho cuanto he podido por ayudarla, señorita Garth. Se lo he contado a Norah.

¡Se lo había contado a Norah! ¿Era aquella joven, que había tenido valor para afrontar la terrible obligación ante la que se había arredrado una mujer lo bastante mayor para ser su madre, la misma joven a la que había educado la señorita Garth, la joven cuyo carácter ella creía conocer tan bien como el propio?

- ¡Magdalen! -exclamó con vehemencia-. ¡Me das miedo!

Magdalen suspiró y dio media vuelta con gesto cansado.

- Procure no pensar peor de mí de lo que merezco -dijo-. No puedo llorar. Mi corazón se ha secado.

Se alejó caminando lentamente por la hierba. La señorita Garth contempló la alta y negra figura hasta que se perdió entre los árboles. Mientras la tuvo a la vista, no pudo pensar en nada más. En cuanto desapareció, pensó en Norah. Por primera vez en su trato con las hermanas, su corazón la condujo instintivamente hacia la mayor.

Norah seguía en su dormitorio. Estaba sentada en el sofá junto a la ventana, con el viejo libro de música de su madre -el recuerdo que la señora Vanstone había hallado en el estudio de su marido el día de su muerte- abierto sobre el regazo. Levantó la vista de él con una aflicción tan serena y señaló con tan pronta amabilidad el sitio vacío junto a ella que la señorita Garth dudó por un momento de que Magdalen le hubiera dicho la verdad.

- Mire -dijo Norah simplemente, volviendo a la primera página del libro de música-. Lleva escrito el nombre de mi madre y unos versos de mi padre en la página siguiente. Esto podremos guardarlo, aunque no podamos conservar nada más. -Rodeó los hombros de la señorita Garth con el brazo; un leve rubor se extendió por sus mejillas-. Veo la preocupación pintada en su rostro -susurró-. ¿Soy yo quien le preocupa? ¿Duda de que lo sepa? Sé toda la verdad. Puede que sienta una mayor amargura más adelante, ahora es demasiado pronto. ¿Ha visto a Magdalen? Ha salido a buscarla. ¿Dónde la ha dejado?

- En el jardín. No he podido hablarle ni mirarla. Magdalen me ha dado miedo.

Norah se levantó prestamente; se levantó sorprendida y angustiada por la respuesta de la señorita Garth.

- No piense mal de Magdalen -dijo-. Magdalen sufre en secreto mucho más que yo. Procure no afligirse por lo que ha oído sobre nosotras esta mañana. ¿Importa acaso quiénes somos o lo que conservemos o perdamos? ¿Qué podemos perder nosotras, después de perder a nuestros padres? ¡Oh, señorita Garth, ésa es nuestra única amargura! ¿Qué recordamos ayer de ellos, cuando los depositamos en su tumba? Nada más que el amor que nos dieron, el amor que no volveremos a tener. ¿Qué más podemos recordar hoy? ¡Cómo pueden el mundo y sus crueles leyes cambiar nuestra memoria de los padres más buenos que han existido jamás! -Se interrumpió, esforzándose por sobreponerse a su pena, y tranquilamente pero con decisión consiguió dominarla-. ¿Quiere esperar un momento aquí -dijo- mientras voy en busca de Magdalen? Magdalen ha sido siempre su favorita; quiero que siga siéndolo. -Dejó el libro de música gentilmente sobre el regazo de la señorita Garth y salió de la habitación.

«Magdalen ha sido siempre su favorita.»

Pese al cariño con que las había pronunciado, estas palabras sonaron como un reproche a la señorita Garth. Por primera vez en la larga amistad entre ella y sus pupilas, le asaltó la duda de si se había equivocado fatalmente, y con ella cuantos la rodeaban, en su diferente apreciación de las hermanas.

La señorita Garth había estudiado los caracteres de sus dos pupilas a la luz de una intimidad diaria de doce años. De repente esos caracteres, que ella creía haber sondeado en toda su extensión, sufrían la dura prueba de la pesadumbre. ¿Con qué resultado? ¿Con el que su experiencia anterior le había enseñado a esperar? No; en

total contradicción con sus expectativas. ¿Qué implicaba aquel resultado?

Al hacerse esta pregunta, acudieron a ella dudas que a todos en alguna ocasión nos han sorprendido y entristecido.

¿Existe en todo ser humano, bajo ese carácter externo y visible al que dan forma las influencias sociales que nos rodean, una naturaleza interna e invisible que forma parte de nosotros mismos y que la educación puede modificar indirectamente, pero no cambiar por completo? ¿Es acaso la filosofía que lo niega y que afirma, por el contrario, que nacemos con una naturaleza como una hoja de papel en blanco, una filosofía incapaz de advertir que no nacemos con rostros inexpresivos, una filosofía que jamás ha comparado a dos criaturas de apenas unos días de vida y que jamás ha observado que esas criaturas no nacen con un temperamento virginal para que lo moldeen a voluntad sus madres y niñeras? ¿Existen fuerzas innatas hacia el Bien o hacia el Mal en todos nosotros, de infinita variedad según cada individuo y tan enraizadas que no hay estímulo ni represión en este mundo que pueda alterarlas? ¿Un Bien y un Mal ocultos, a merced ambos por igual de la oportunidad liberadora o de la tentación precisa? Dentro de esos límites terrenales, ¿son siempre la clave las circunstancias mundanas? ¿Acaso no hay vigilancia humana que pueda avisarnos de antemano sobre las fuerzas encerradas en nuestro interior y que podrían ser desatadas por esa clave?

Por primera vez tuvo la señorita Garth tales pensamientos, que se alzaron oscuramente como posibilidades sombrías y terribles. Por primera vez asoció esas posibilidades a ciertas conductas pasadas y a su carácter, así como a la vida y fortuna futuras de las hermanas huérfanas.

Escudriñando en ambas naturalezas como en un oscuro cristal, la señorita Garth tanteó el camino, duda a duda, de una posible verdad a otra. Pudiera ser que hasta entonces sólo hubiera visto claramente la superficie de los caracteres de Norah y Magdalen. Pudiera ser que la discreción y la reserva poco atrayentes de una hermana y la atractiva sinceridad y animación de la otra estuvieran más o menos relacionadas con ciertas causas físicas que dan como consecuencia ciertos resultados morales. Pudiera ser que bajo la superficie así formada -una superficie que hasta aquel momento, en la vida feliz, próspera y sin incidentes de las hermanas, nada había perturbado- hubieran permanecido ocultas unas fuerzas innatas que la conmoción de la primera calamidad de su vida hubiera ahora arrojado a la luz. ¿Era así? ¿Brillaba una promesa de futuro con luz profética a través de la superficie sombría de la reserva de Norah, y se ensombrecía con oscuridad profética bajo el resplandor superficial del animado carácter de Magdalen? Si la vida de la hermana mayor estaba destinada a partir de entonces a ser el terreno abonado para el Bien que había en ella sin sembrar, ¿estaba condenada la vida de la más joven a ser el campo de batalla de un conflicto mortal con las fuerzas del Mal que surgían de su interior?

Una consternada señorita Garth rehuyó tan terrible conclusión cuando estaba a punto de llegar a ella. Tenía un corazón de mujer. Recurrió al convencimiento que elevaba a Norah en su estima y rechazó la duda que amenazaba con degradar a Magdalen. Se levantó y paseó por la habitación con impaciencia; con súbito enojo desechó la cadena de ideas que había construido apenas hacía unos instantes. ¿Qué más daba si en la firmeza del carácter de Magdalen había elementos peligrosos? ¿No era su deber acaso ayudar a la joven a combatirlos? ¿Cómo había cumplido con ese deber? Se había dejado gobernar por sus primeros temores e impresiones; jamás se había detenido a considerar si la acción que Magdalen había realizado esa mañana y confesado abiertamente implicaba una fortaleza abnegada que prometía los más nobles y duraderos efectos para el futuro. Había dejado que Norah pronunciara aquellas palabras de cariñoso, reproche que ella debería haber dicho primero. «¡Oh! -pensó con amargura-, ¡cuánto he vivido en este mundo y qué poco he sabido de mis debilidades y maldades hasta hoy!»

La puerta de la habitación se abrió. Norah entró tal como había salido, sola.

- ¿Recuerda haber dejado algo sobre la mesita del jardín? -preguntó tranquilamente.

Antes de que la señorita Garth pudiera responder a la pregunta, Norah le tendió el

testamento y la carta de su padre.

- Magdalen volvió después de que usted se fuera -dijo- y ha encontrado estas últimas reliquias. Oyó decir al señor Pendril que eran su legado y el mío. Cuando he salido al jardín, estaba leyendo la carta. No ha sido necesario que le hablara; nuestro padre le ha hablado desde la tumba. ¡Vea cómo le ha escuchado!

Señaló la carta. Las huellas de unas grandes lágrimas emborronaban las últimas líneas del difunto.

- Sus lágrimas -dijo Norah en voz baja.

La señorita Garth dejó caer la cabeza al ver la revelación muda de que Magdalen había recobrado lo mejor de sí misma.

- ¡Oh, no dude de ella nunca más! -le imploró Norah-. Ahora estamos solas, tenemos un duro camino que recorrer en el mundo con toda la paciencia de que seamos capaces. Si Magdalen vacilara alguna vez y se diera la vuelta, ayúdela en recuerdo del amor de otros tiempos, ayúdela a luchar contra sí misma.

- ¡Con todas mis fuerzas y todo mi corazón, como hay Dios que me ha de juzgar, con mi vida entera! -Con tal fervor se expresó la señorita Garth. Tomó la mano que Norah le tendía y se la llevó a los labios con arrepentimiento y humildad-. ¡Oh, cariño mío, perdóname! He estado completamente ciega, ¡jamás te he valorado como merecías!

Norah le impidió con gentileza que siguiera hablando.

- Venga conmigo al jardín -susurró afablemente-, venga y ayude a Magdalen a aguardar el futuro con paciencia.

¡El futuro! ¿Quién podía vislumbrarlo siquiera? ¿Quién podía ver más que la siniestra figura de Michael Vanstone acechando sombríamente el presente y ocultando toda perspectiva más allá de sus límites?

CAPÍTULO XV

Dos días después, por la mañana, se recibieron noticias del señor Pendril. Había averiguado el lugar del Continente en el que residía Michael Vanstone. Vivía en Zurich, adonde le había enviado una carta el mismo día en que se obtuvo la información. Se esperaba respuesta en el curso de la semana; su contenido se comunicaría inmediatamente a las señoras de Combe-Raven.

Pese a su brevedad, el intervalo de tiempo se hizo aburrido. Diez días pasaron antes de recibir la esperada respuesta y, cuando por fin llegó, resultó no ser una respuesta en el sentido estricto. Indicaba meramente al señor Pendril un agente en Londres que tenía instrucciones de Michael Vanstone. Se habían descubierto ciertas dificultades en relación con esas instrucciones, por lo que había sido necesario volver a escribir a Zurich. Y ahí se habían detenido una vez más, de momento, «las negociaciones». Un segundo párrafo de la carta del señor Pendril transmitía una información totalmente nueva. El hijo del señor Michael Vanstone (hijo único), el señor Noel Vanstone, había llegado a Londres recientemente y se había instalado en casa de su primo, el señor George Bartram. Consideraciones profesionales habían inducido al señor Pendril a visitarle. El señor Bartram le había recibido con gran amabilidad, pero el mismo caballero le comunicó que su primo no se hallaba en condiciones de recibir visitas. Hacía unos cuantos años que el señor Noel Vanstone padecía una fastidiosa y pertinaz enfermedad; había vuelto a Inglaterra expresamente para consultar a los mejores médicos y el viaje lo había fatigado hasta el punto de tener que guardar cama. En tales circunstancias, el señor Pendril no tuvo más remedio que marcharse. Una entrevista con el señor Noel Vanstone podría haber resuelto parte de las dificultades que presentaban las instrucciones de su padre. Tal como se presentaban las cosas, no quedaba sino esperar unos cuantos días más.

Los días pasaron, días vacíos de soledad e incertidumbre. Por fin una tercera carta del abogado anunció la tan demorada conclusión de la correspondencia. Había recibido la respuesta final de Zurich, que el señor Pendril comunicaría personalmente en Combe-Raven el día siguiente por la tarde.

El día siguiente era miércoles, doce de agosto. El tiempo había cambiado por la noche; amaneció un sol pálido entre nubes y brumas. Al mediodía el cielo estaba completamente cubierto, la temperatura había bajado sensiblemente y caía una fina cortina de lluvia sobre la tierra sedienta. Hacia las tres de la tarde, la señorita Garth y Norah entraron en la salita para esperar la llegada del señor Pendril. Poco después se unió a ellas Magdalen. Media hora más tarde llegó a sus oídos, desde la cerca de la arboleda, el golpe familiar del pestillo de hierro en su cajetín. El señor Pendril y el señor Clare aparecieron por el sendero del jardín caminando bajo la lluvia, cogidos del brazo y protegidos por el mismo paraguas. El abogado inclinó la cabeza cuando pasaron junto a las ventanas; el señor Clare siguió caminando derecho, sumido en sus propios pensamientos, sin reparar en nada.

Tras una espera que pareció interminable, tras frotar cansinamente los pies mojados en la alfombrilla del vestíbulo, tras un enigmático y murmurante intercambio de pregunta y respuesta en el umbral de la puerta, los dos entraron en la casa con el señor Clare al frente. El anciano se dirigió directamente a la mesa sin saludar y miró a las tres mujeres que se hallaban al otro lado con una compasión grave pintada en su rostro arrugado y de duras facciones.

- Malas noticias -dijo-. Soy enemigo de prolongar la incertidumbre innecesariamente. La franqueza es bondad en un caso como éste. Quiero ser amable con ustedes y se lo digo francamente: malas noticias.

El señor Pendril se acercó. Estrechó la mano de la señorita Garth y de las dos hermanas en silencio y se sentó a su lado. El señor Clare se instaló en una silla junto a la ventana. La luz gris del día lluvioso caía con suavidad y tristeza sobre los rostros de Norah y

Magdalen, que estaban sentadas juntas frente a él. La señorita Garth se había sentado un poco atrás, sumida parcialmente en las sombras, y la faz serena del abogado se veía de perfil desde allí. Así se mostraban los cuatro ocupantes de la habitación al señor Clare desde su apartado rincón; los largos dedos semejantes a garras entrelazados alrededor de la rodilla; sus negros y vigilantes ojos escudriñando, ora un rostro, ora otro. El goteo susurrante de la lluvia entre las hojas y el claro e incesante tictac del reloj sobre la repisa de la chimenea hicieron indescriptiblemente opresivo el minuto de silencio que siguió al acomodo de cada cual. Fue un alivio para todos que el señor Pendril hablara.

- El señor Clare les ha dicho ya -empezó- que soy portador de malas noticias. Lamento tener que decirle, señorita Garth, que las dudas que expresó en nuestra anterior entrevista estaban mejor fundadas que mis esperanzas. Tal como era aquel despiadado hermano mayor en su juventud, continúa siéndolo ahora en la vejez. En toda mi desafortunada experiencia sobre el lado más oscuro de la naturaleza humana, jamás había conocido a un hombre tan cerrado a toda idea de piedad como Michael Vanstone.

- ¿Quiere usted decir que se quedará con el total de la fortuna de su hermano y no asegurará en modo alguno el porvenir de sus hijas? -preguntó la señorita Garth.

- Ofrece una suma de dinero para emergencias inmediatas -respondió el señor Pendril- tan mezquina y vergonzosamente insuficiente que me avergonzaría mencionarla.

- ¿Y nada para el futuro?

- Nada en absoluto.

Al oír esta respuesta, la señorita Garth y Norah tuvieron un mismo pensamiento. Aquella decisión, que privaba a ambas hermanas por igual de los recursos de la fortuna, no acababa ahí, sin embargo, para la más joven. La cruel resolución de Michael Vanstone había dictado prácticamente la sentencia que exiliaba a Frank a la China y que destruía la esperanza inmediata de boda para Magdalen. Cuando aquellas palabras salieron de los labios del abogado, la señorita Garth y Norah miraron a Magdalen con inquietud. El rostro de ésta palideció un tanto, pero no movió un solo músculo ni pronunció una sola palabra. Norah, que aferraba la mano de su hermana, notó que le temblaba un momento y que luego se volvía fría; eso fue todo.

- Permítanme que les explique claramente los pasos que he dado -prosiguió el señor Pendril-. Mi anhelo es que no crean que he escatimado esfuerzos. Cuando escribí a Michael Vanstone en primera instancia, no me limité a la acostumbrada exposición formal. Sometí a su consideración con toda franqueza y seriedad todas y cada una de las circunstancias que le han llevado a entrar en posesión de la fortuna de su hermano. Cuando me llegó su respuesta, remitiéndome a las instrucciones escritas que obraban en poder de su abogado de Londres, y cuando depositaron en mis manos una copia de dichas instrucciones, me negué tajantemente, al conocerlas, a considerar que la decisión del que las había escrito fuera definitiva. Induje al abogado de la otra parte a concedernos un aplazamiento, intenté ver al señor Noel Vanstone en Londres con el propósito de obtener su intercesión y, al no conseguirlo, escribí personalmente a su padre por segunda vez. La respuesta me remitía de forma breve e insolente a las instrucciones ya transmitidas, manifestaba que tales instrucciones eran definitivas y se negaba a seguir manteniendo correspondencia conmigo. Ése fue el principio y el final de la negociación. Si he pasado por alto algún modo de conmover a ese hombre despiadado, díganmelo y lo probaré.

Miró a Norah. Ésta apretó la mano de su hermana para darle ánimos y respondió por ambas.

- Hablo por mi hermana y por mí -dijo con un leve rubor y una tristeza serena y resignada que empañaba apenas la natural gentileza de sus maneras-. Ha hecho usted cuanto podía hacerse, señor Pendril. Hemos intentado no confiar demasiado en nuestras esperanzas. Le estamos inmensamente agradecidas por su bondad en unos momentos en que ambas estamos muy necesitadas de ella.

La mano de Magdalen devolvió la presión a la de su hermana, se retiró, se entretuvo un momento en arreglar el vestido con impaciencia, luego acercó la silla a la mesa. Apoyando un brazo en ella (con el puño apretado), Magdalen miró al señor Pendril. Su rostro, siempre destacable por su ausencia de color, causaba ahora asombro al mirarlo por su extrema palidez. Pero la luz brillaba con la fuerza de siempre en sus grandes ojos grises y su voz, aunque en tono bajo, tenía un acento claro y decidido cuando se dirigió al abogado en los siguientes términos:

- Entiendo por lo que usted dice, señor Pendril, que el hermano de mi padre había enviado sus órdenes escritas a Londres y que usted recibió una copia. ¿La ha conservado?

- Desde luego.

- ¿La lleva consigo?

- Sí.

- ¿Puedo verla?

El señor Pendril vaciló y miró con inquietud a Magdalen y a la señorita Garth y de nuevo a Magdalen.

- Le ruego que me haga el favor de no insistir en su petición -dijo-. Sin duda es suficiente con que conozca el resultado de dichas instrucciones. ¿Para qué alterarse sin necesidad leyéndolas? Están expresadas con tanta crueldad, muestran una carencia de sentimientos tan abominable, que realmente no creo que deba permitirle leerlas.

- Aprecio su bondad, señor Pendril, al desear ahorrarme sufrimiento, pero puedo soportarlo. Prometo no afligir a nadie. ¿Me perdonará si repito mi petición?

Extendió la mano, la suave y blanca mano virginal que aún no había tocado nada que la manchara o endureciera.

- ¡Oh, Magdalen, piénsalo bien! -dijo Norah.

- Afliges al señor Pendril -añadió la señorita Garth-, nos afliges a todos.

- No conseguirá nada -siguió rogando el abogado-, perdóneme por decírselo. Realmente no servirá a ningún propósito útil que le muestre las instrucciones.

(«¡Estúpidos! -dijo el señor Clare para sí-. ¿Es que no ven que está decidida a salirse con la suya?»)

- Algo me dice que existe un propósito -insistió Magdalen-. Ésta es una decisión muy seria. Es más seria para mí... -Miró hacia atrás al señor Clare, que la observaba detenidamente, y de inmediato volvió a mirar hacia delante con la primera muestra de emoción externa que se le escapaba-. Es aún más seria para mí -prosiguió-, por razones personales, que para mi hermana. Nada sé todavía sino que el hermano de nuestro padre nos ha despojado de nuestra fortuna. Debe de tener algún motivo para semejante conducta. No es justo para él ni para nosotras que se mantenga oculto ese motivo. Deliberadamente ha robado a Norah y me ha robado a mí; creo que tenemos derecho, si así lo deseamos, a saber por qué.

- Yo no lo deseo -dijo Norah.

- Yo sí -dijo Magdalen, y una vez más extendió la mano.

En ese momento, el señor Clare reaccionó e intervino por primera vez.

- Usted ya ha aliviado su conciencia -dijo, dirigiéndose al abogado-. Concédale el derecho que reclama. Está en su derecho, si así lo desea.

Lentamente, el señor Pendril se sacó las instrucciones escritas del bolsillo.

- Ya le he advertido -dijo, y alargó los papeles a Magdalen sin decir nada más. Una de las páginas tenía una esquina doblada y por esa página doblada empezaba el manuscrito cuando Magdalen dio la vuelta a las hojas.

- ¿Es éste el lugar en el que se refiere a mi hermana y a mí? -preguntó.

El señor Pendril afirmó con la cabeza y Magdalen alisó el manuscrito sobre la mesa.

- ¿Te decides, Norah? -preguntó, volviéndose hacia su hermana-. ¿Lo leo en voz alta o para mí sola?

- Para ti sola -dijo la señorita Garth respondiendo por Norah, que la miraba con muda perplejidad y consternación.

- Será como quieres -dijo Magdalen. Volvió entonces su atención al manuscrito y leyó las siguientes líneas:

... Conoce usted ahora mis deseos en relación con los bienes en metálico y con la venta del mobiliario, los carruajes, los caballos y demás. El último punto pendiente sobre el que debo darle instrucciones se refiere a las personas que habitan la casa y a ciertas reclamaciones absurdas que ha presentado en su favor un abogado llamado Pendril, quien sin duda tiene sus propios motivos para dirigírmelas a mí.

Tengo entendido que mi difunto hermano ha dejado dos hijas ilegítimas, ambas jóvenes y en edad de ganarse el sustento. El abogado que las representa ha alegado diversas consideraciones, todas irregulares, con respecto a dichas personas. Tenga la amabilidad de decirle que ni usted ni yo atendemos cuestiones puramente sentimentales y luego explíquele claramente, para su información, que mis motivos son los mismos que regulan mi conducta y que la ayuda es la que considero justificada para esas dos jovencitas. Hallará instrucciones detalladas con respecto a estos dos puntos en el siguiente párrafo.

Deseo que las personas mencionadas conozcan de una vez para siempre qué opino de las circunstancias que han hecho llegar a mis manos la fortuna de mi difunto hermano. Hágales saber que considero esas circunstancias como una intervención de la Providencia que me ha devuelto la herencia que siempre debió ser mía. Recibo el dinero no sólo como un derecho, sino también como adecuada compensación por la injusticia a que me sometió mi padre y como adecuado castigo a mi hermano menor por las viles intrigas mediante las cuales consiguió desheredarme. Su conducta de joven fue indigna en todos los aspectos de la vida, y lo que entonces fue continuó siéndolo (según palabras de su propio representante legal) después de que yo interrumpiera toda comunicación con él. Al parecer presentó sistemáticamente en sociedad a una mujer como esposa suya, cuando no lo era, y redondeó ese insulto a la moral casándose después con ella. Semejante conducta ha hecho caer la justicia divina sobre él y sobre sus hijas. No me arriesgaré a ser castigado yo mismo ayudando a esas hijas a continuar con la impostura practicada por sus padres y a ocupar un lugar en el mundo al que no tienen derecho. Que se ganen el pan trabajando, como corresponde a su nacimiento. Si se muestran dispuestas a aceptar su auténtica posición, las ayudaré a iniciar su vida virtuosamente regalándoles cien libras a cada una. Ésta es la suma que le autorizo a pagarles si la solicitan personalmente, con el debido acuse de recibo y con la aceptación expresa de que esa transacción, una vez completada, será el principio y el final de toda conexión entre ellas y yo. Dejo a su discreción las disposiciones pertinentes para que abandonen la casa. Sólo me queda por añadir que mi decisión en este asunto, como en todos los demás, es tajante y definitiva.

Línea a línea -sin alzar la vista de las páginas ni una sola vez- leyó Magdalen esas frases atroces sin dejarse una coma. Las otras personas presentes en la habitación, todas pendientes de ella, vieron cómo se alzaba la pechera de su vestido cada vez con mayor rapidez, vieron la mano que al principio sostenía levemente el manuscrito cerrándose

inconscientemente sobre el papel y estrujándolo a medida que avanzaba hacia el final, pero no detectaron ningún otro signo externo de lo que pasaba en su interior. En cuanto terminó, Magdalen apartó en silencio el manuscrito y se tapó de repente el rostro con las manos. Cuando las retiró, las otras cuatro personas de la habitación notaron un cambio en ella. Algo se había alterado en su expresión de un modo sutil y silencioso, algo que hizo que aquellas facciones familiares parecieran extrañas de repente, incluso a los ojos de su hermana y de la señorita Garth, algo que no se olvidaría en los años posteriores en relación con ese día y que jamás sería descrito. Sus primeras palabras se dirigieron al señor Pendril.

- ¿Puedo pedirle un favor más -preguntó- antes de que pase a las disposiciones?

El señor Pendril respondió ceremoniosamente asintiendo con la cabeza. La resolución de Magdalen de leer las instrucciones no parecía haber producido una impresión favorable en el abogado.

- Acaba de mencionar lo que ha sido tan amable de hacer en nuestro beneficio cuando escribió por primera vez al señor Michael Vanstone -continuó Magdalen-. Ha dicho que le hizo partícipe de todas las circunstancias. Quiero, si usted me lo permite, cerciorarme de que conocía realmente todos los hechos cuando envió estas órdenes a su abogado. ¿Sabía que mi padre había hecho testamento y que dejaba en él su fortuna a mi hermana y a mí?

- Lo sabía -dijo el señor Pendril.

- ¿Le explicó usted a qué se debe que nos hallemos en esta situación de desamparo?

- Le conté que su padre ignoraba por completo la necesidad de redactar un nuevo testamento cuando se casó.

- ¿Y que ese otro testamento hubiera sido redactado después de que hablara con el señor Clare de no haber sido por el horrible infortunio de su muerte?

- También eso lo sabía.

- ¿Conocía la infatigable bondad que para con nosotras dos...?

Su voz se quebró por primera vez; suspiró y se llevó la mano a la cabeza con gesto cansado. Norah le rogó encarecidamente; la señorita Garth le rogó encarecidamente; el señor Clare guardaba silencio observándola cada vez con mayor seriedad. Ella respondió a la amonestación de su hermana con una débil sonrisa.

- Mantendré mi promesa -dijo-. No afligiré a nadie. -Volviéndose de nuevo hacia el señor Pendril, reiteró su pregunta, pero con otras palabras-. ¿Sabía el señor Michael Vanstone que la mayor preocupación de mi padre era asegurar el porvenir de mi hermana y el mío?

- Lo sabía en palabras textuales de su padre. Le envié un extracto de la última carta que recibí de él.

- ¿La carta en que le pedía que viniera por amor de Dios y disipara la espantosa idea de que sus hijas estaban desprotegidas? ¿La carta en la que decía que no descansaría en su tumba si nos dejaba desheredadas?

- Esa carta y esas palabras.

Magdalen hizo una pausa con la vista clavada aún en el rostro del abogado.

- Quiero grabarlo todo en mi cabeza -dijo-, antes de continuar. El señor Vanstone conocía el primer testamento, sabía qué impidió que se redactara el segundo, conocía la existencia de la carta y la leyó. ¿Qué más sabía? ¿Le habló usted de la enfermedad mortal de mi madre? ¿Le dijo que su parte de la herencia habría pasado a nosotras si hubiera sido capaz de levantar su mano de moribunda en su presencia? ¿Intentó usted

hacer que se avergonzara de la cruel ley que llama hijas de nadie a las jóvenes en nuestra situación y que le permite aprovecharse de nosotras como lo está haciendo?

- Todo eso le dije. No dejé resquicio a la duda. No dejé nada en el tintero.

Lentamente Magdalen extendió la mano hacia la copia de las instrucciones y lentamente volvió a doblarla tal como se la habían entregado.

- Le estoy sumamente agradecida, señor Pendril. -Tras estas palabras, inclinó la cabeza y suavemente empujó las hojas dobladas hacia el otro lado de la mesa, luego se volvió hacia su hermana.

- Norah -dijo-, si llegamos ambas a hacernos viejas, y si alguna vez olvidas todo lo que le debemos a Michael Vanstone, acude a mí y yo te lo recordaré.

Se levantó y se dirigió a la ventana. Al pasar junto al señor Clare, el anciano extendió sus dedos como garras y la cogió con fuerza por el brazo antes de que ella se diera cuenta de su presencia.

- ¿Qué oculta esa máscara? -preguntó el señor Clare obligándola a inclinarse hacia él y mirándola de cerca a la cara-. ¿De qué extremo de la temperatura humana surge tu valor, del frío glacial o del fuego al rojo?

Ella se echó hacia atrás y volvió la cabeza en silencio. Cualquier hombre la hubiera ofendido con una intrusión tan poco escrupulosa en sus propios pensamientos salvo el padre de Frank. El señor Clare dejó caer su brazo tan de repente como lo había aferrado dejando que se acercara a la ventana.

«No -se dijo-. Sea lo que sea, no es el frío glacial. Tanto peor para ella y para cuantos la quieren.»

Se hizo una pausa momentánea. Una vez más el susurro de las gotas de lluvia y el tictac regular del reloj llenaron el silencioso vacío. El señor Pendril se guardó de nuevo las instrucciones en el bolsillo, reflexionó unos instantes y, volviéndose hacia Norah y la señorita Garth, llamó su atención nuevamente sobre el perentorio y acuciante asunto del tiempo.

- Nuestra consulta se ha prolongado innecesariamente -dijo- debido a dolorosas referencias al pasado. Haríamos bien en trazar nuestras disposiciones para el futuro. Me veo obligado a regresar a la ciudad esta noche. Les ruego que me hagan saber de qué modo puedo serles de mayor utilidad. Les ruego que me digan de qué dificultades y responsabilidades puedo aliviarlas.

En un principio ni Norah ni la señorita Garth parecieron capaces de responder. La reacción de Magdalen ante la noticia que aniquilaba las perspectivas de matrimonio que había oído de labios de su propio padre apenas hacía un mes las habían dejado perplejas y consternadas por igual. Se habían armado de valor para enfrentarse a la conmoción de un dolor apasionado, o para afrontar la prueba aún más penosa de verla sumida en una desesperación muda; pero no estaban preparadas para su inquebrantable decisión de leer las instrucciones, ni para las terribles preguntas que había dirigido al abogado, ni para su inamovible determinación de grabar en su memoria las circunstancias en las que Michael Vanstone había pronunciado su decisión. Allí estaba, junto a la ventana, como un misterio insondable para la hermana de la que jamás la habían separado y para la institutriz que la había educado desde su infancia. La señorita Garth recordaba las negras dudas que la acecharon el día en que Magdalen y ella se encontraron en el jardín. Norah aguardaba con ansiedad el tiempo por venir, sintiendo el primer temor grave por su hermana. Ambas habían permanecido pasivas hasta entonces, con la desesperación de no saber qué hacer. Ambas guardaban ahora silencio con la desesperación de no saber qué decir.

El señor Pendril las ayudó con paciencia y bondad, volviendo al tema de sus planes futuros por segunda vez.

- Lamento tener que acuciarlas con asuntos prosaicos -dijo- cuando menos dispuestas están para tratarlos, pero debo regresar a Londres esta noche con sus instrucciones. En primer lugar me referiré a la vergonzosa oferta pecuniaria a la que antes he aludido. Habiendo leído las instrucciones, la menor de las señoritas Vanstone no necesita que yo le informe. La mayor me disculpará, espero, si le digo (lo que debería avergonzarme, pero es necesario) que la disposición del señor Michael Vanstone para las hijas de su hermano empieza y termina con un ofrecimiento de cien libras a cada una.

El rostro de Norah enrojeció de indignación. Se puso en pie como si Michael Vanstone estuviera presente en la habitación y la hubiera insultado en persona.

- Comprendo -dijo el abogado, deseoso de ahorrarle molestias-. Puedo decirle al señor Michael Vanstone que rechaza usted el dinero.

- Dígale -espetó ella con vehemencia-, ¡que no tocaría ni un cuarto de penique de ese dinero aunque me muriera de hambre en una cuneta!

- ¿Debo notificarle también su negativa? -preguntó el señor Pendril a Magdalen.

Ella se dio la vuelta, pero mantuvo el rostro en la sombra quedándose pegada a la ventana, de espaldas a la luz.

- Dígale de mi parte -dijo-, que lo piense dos veces antes de darme cien libras para empezar mi vida. Le daré tiempo para pensarlo. -Pronunció estas extrañas palabras con un marcado énfasis y, volviendo rápidamente el rostro hacia la ventana, lo ocultó a las miradas de cuantos se hallaban en la habitación.

- Ambas rechazan el ofrecimiento -dijo el señor Pendril sacando su lápiz para tomar nota profesionalmente de la decisión. Al cerrar su libreta miró a Magdalen con recelo. Magdalen había despertado en él una desconfianza latente, que es una segunda naturaleza en un abogado. Sospechaba de su actitud; sospechaba de su manera de hablar. La hermana parecía ejercer una mayor influencia sobre Magdalen que la señorita Garth. Decidió hablar con ella en privado antes de marcharse.

Mientras pensaba en ello, una nueva pregunta de Magdalen reclamó su atención.

- ¿Es viejo? -preguntó de repente sin volverse.

- Si se refiere al señor Michael Vanstone, tiene setenta y cinco o setenta y seis años de edad.

- Hace un rato ha mencionado a su hijo. ¿Tiene otros hijos, o hijas?

- No.

- ¿Sabe usted algo de su mujer?

- Hace muchos años que murió.

Hubo una pausa.

- ¿Por qué quieres saberlo? -preguntó Norah.

- Perdonadme -respondió Magdalen en voz baja-. No preguntaré nada más.

Por tercera vez, el señor Pendril volvió al motivo más prosaico de la entrevista.

- No debemos olvidar a los criados -dijo-. Se han de liquidar cuentas y despedirlos. Yo les daré las explicaciones necesarias antes de irme. En cuanto a la casa, no tienen de qué preocuparse. Carruajes y caballos, muebles, plata y demás se dejarán simplemente en la propiedad en espera de nuevas órdenes del señor Michael Vanstone. Pero cualquier pertenencia personal de usted o de su hermana, señorita Vanstone, sus joyas y vestidos y cualquier pequeño regalo que les hayan hecho, están enteramente a su disposición. Con respecto a la fecha de su partida, tengo entendido que pasará un mes o

más antes de que el señor Michael Vanstone pueda abandonar Zurich, y estoy seguro de que hago justicia a su abogado al decir...

- Perdóneme, señor Pendril -intervino Norah-. Creo comprender, por lo que usted acaba de decir, que nuestra casa y todo lo que hay en ella pertenece a... -Se interrumpió como si aborreciera el mero hecho de pronunciar el nombre de su tío.

- A Michael Vanstone -dijo el señor Pendril-. La casa pasa a ser de su propiedad con el resto de los bienes.

- ¡Entonces yo, personalmente, estoy dispuesta a abandonarla mañana mismo!

Magdalen dio un respingo cuando habló su hermana y miró al señor Clare con los primeros signos evidentes de inquietud y alarma que había mostrado hasta el momento.

- No se enfade conmigo -susurró, inclinándose hacia el anciano con una súbita actitud de humildad y un repentino nerviosismo en sus maneras-. ¡No puedo irme sin ver primero a Frank!

- Lo verás -dijo el señor Clare-. Estoy aquí para hablar contigo sobre eso cuando termine este asunto.

- Es totalmente innecesario que apresure la partida como propone -continuó el señor Pendril dirigiéndose a Norah-. Puedo asegurarle sin temor a equivocarme que con una semana a partir de hoy será suficiente.

- Si ésta es la casa de Michael Vanstone -repitió Norah-, estoy dispuesta a abandonarla mañana.

Dejó su silla con un gesto de impaciencia y se sentó más lejos, en el sofá. Al poner la mano sobre el respaldo, su rostro se alteró. Allí, en la cabecera del sofá, estaban los cojines que habían sostenido a su madre cuando se echó por última vez a descansar. Allí, a los pies del sofá, se hallaba la anticuada y voluminosa butaca que había sido el asiento predilecto de su padre en días lluviosos, cuando su hermana y ella solían entretenerlo tocando sus melodías favoritas en el piano que había frente a él. Un hondo suspiro que en vano intentó contener escapó de sus labios. Oh, pensó, ¡había olvidado a estos viejos amigos! ¿Cómo voy a separarme de ellos cuando llegue el momento?

- ¿Puedo preguntarle, señorita Vanstone, si su hermana y usted han trazado algún plan definido para el futuro? -inquirió el señor Pendril-. ¿Han pensado en algún lugar de residencia?

- Yo puedo responder a su pregunta por ellas, señor -dijo la señorita Garth-. Cuando abandonen esta casa, la abandonarán conmigo. Mi hogar será su hogar y mi pan será su pan. Sus padres me honraron, confiaron en mí y me mostraron su afecto. Durante doce felices años no me permitieron jamás recordar que era una institutriz, sino que hicieron que me considerara su compañera y amiga. El recuerdo que de ellos tengo es el de una amabilidad y generosidad sin límites y mi vida estará dedicada a pagar esta deuda de gratitud a sus hijas huérfanas.

Norah se levantó presurosa del sofá; Magdalen abandonó impetuosamente la ventana. Por una vez no hubo contraste en el comportamiento de las hermanas. Por una vez el mismo impulso movió sus corazones, el mismo grave sentimiento inspiró sus palabras. La señorita Garth esperó a que pasara el primer estallido de emoción, luego se levantó y tomando a Norah y Magdalen de la mano, se dirigió al señor Pendril y al señor Clare. Habló con un total dominio de sí misma, con la fortaleza de una bondad inconsciente y sin artificio.

- Incluso una historia tan insignificante como la mía -dijo- adquiere cierta importancia en momentos como éste. Deseo que ustedes dos, caballeros, entiendan que no prometo más a las hijas de su viejo amigo de lo que puedo ofrecerles. Cuando llegué a esta casa, entré a su servicio en una situación de independencia económica poco común entre las institutrices. En mi juventud me dedicaba a la enseñanza junto con mi hermana mayor.

Fundamos una escuela en Londres que creció y prosperó. La dejé para convertirme en institutriz únicamente porque la pesada responsabilidad de la escuela era más de lo que mis fuerzas alcanzaban a soportar. Mi parte de los beneficios está intacta y sigo percibiendo un interés pecuniario de nuestra institución. Ésta es mi historia en pocas palabras. Cuando abandonemos esta casa, propongo que vayamos a la escuela de Londres, que mi hermana mayor sigue dirigiendo con fortuna. Podemos vivir allí con la mayor tranquilidad hasta que el tiempo nos ayude a soportar nuestra pena mejor de lo que la soportamos ahora. Si el cambio en las perspectivas futuras de Norah y Magdalen las obliga a ganarse el sustento, yo puedo ayudarlas a ganárselo como corresponde a las hijas de un caballero. Las mejores familias del país se alegran de pedir consejo a mi hermana en lo tocante a la educación de sus hijos, y yo respondo de antemano de su sincero deseo de servir a las hijas del señor Vanstone tanto como respondo del mío. Ése es el futuro que mi gratitud hacia sus padres y mi afecto por ellas les ofrece. Si consideran, caballeros, que mi propuesta es conveniente y justa, y veo en sus caras que así es, no hagamos más penosas las necesidades de nuestra posición demorándonos inútilmente en enfrentarnos a ellas. Cumplamos con nuestra obligación, actuemos conforme a la decisión de Norah y abandonemos la casa mañana. Acaba usted de mencionar a los criados, señor Pendril; estoy dispuesta a convocarlos a todos en la habitación contigua y a ayudarle a resolver sus reclamaciones cuando usted guste.

Sin esperar la respuesta del abogado, sin dar tiempo a las hermanas para darse cuenta de su terrible situación, se dirigió al punto hacia la puerta. Había tomado la sabia resolución de afrontar la dura prueba que las aguardaba haciendo mucho y hablando poco. Antes de que pudiera salir de la habitación, el señor Clare la siguió y la detuvo en el umbral de la puerta.

- Jamás había envidiado los sentimientos de una mujer hasta ahora -dijo el anciano-. Quizá le sorprenda oírlo, pero envidio los suyos. ¡Espere! Tengo algo más que decirle. Aún existe un obstáculo, el impenitente obstáculo de Frank. Ayúdeme a barrerlo. Llévese a la hermana mayor y al abogado con usted y déjeme aquí para poner las cosas en claro con la menor. Quiero ver de qué metal está hecha en realidad.

Mientras el señor Clare dirigía estas frases a la señorita Garth, el señor Pendril había aprovechado la oportunidad para hablar con Norah.

- Antes de volver a la ciudad -dijo-, me gustaría hablar con usted en privado. Después de lo ocurrido hoy, señorita Vanstone, me he formado un muy elevado concepto de su discreción y, como viejo amigo de su padre, quiero tomarme la libertad de hablarle sobre su hermana.

Antes de que Norah pudiera contestar, la invitaron a participar, de acuerdo con la petición del señor Clare, en la entrevista con los criados. Naturalmente el señor Pendril siguió a la señorita Garth. Cuando los tres salieron al vestíbulo, el señor Clare volvió a entrar en la habitación, cerró la puerta e indicó a Magdalen con gesto autoritario que se sentara.

Ella le obedeció en silencio. El señor Clare se paseó de un lado a otro de la habitación y volvió con las manos en los bolsillos laterales de la larga chaqueta suelta y sin forma que solía llevar.

- ¿Qué edad tienes? -preguntó deteniéndose de repente para hablar en el otro extremo de la habitación.

- He cumplido los dieciocho -respondió Magdalen humildemente, sin mirarlo.

- Has demostrado un valor extraordinario para una joven de tu edad. ¿Te queda algo de ese valor?

Ella enlazó las manos y las retorció con fuerza. Unas cuantas lágrimas afluyeron a sus ojos y rodaron lentamente por sus mejillas.

- No puedo renunciar a Frank -dijo débilmente-. Yo no le importo a usted, lo sé, pero mi padre sí le importaba. ¿Intentará ser bueno conmigo Por la amistad que le tenía?

Sus últimas palabras se extinguieron en un susurro; no pudo decir nada más. Hasta entonces no había sentido la capacidad ilimitada del amor de una mujer para absorber cualquier otro suceso, cualquier otra alegría o pesar de su vida. Jamás había asociado a Frank con el recuerdo de sus padres tan cariñosamente como en aquel momento. Nunca la impenetrable atmósfera de engaño a través de la cual contemplan las mujeres al hombre elegido -la atmósfera que la había cegado a todo lo que Frank tenía de débil, mezquino y egoísta- había rodeado a Frank con un halo más brillante que entonces, cuando suplicaba al padre la posesión del hijo.

- ¡Oh, no me pida que renuncie! -dijo, intentando armarse de valor, pero temblando de pies a cabeza. En el instante siguiente volaba hacia el otro extremo de la habitación con la inusitada rapidez de un rayo-. ¡No renunciaré a él! -estalló con fervor-. ¡No! ¡Ni aunque mil padres me lo pidieran!

- Soy sólo un padre -dijo el señor Clare-, y no te lo pido.

Asombrada y encantada de oír aquellas palabras inesperadas, se puso en pie, cruzó la habitación e intentó rodearle el cuello con los brazos. Fue como si intentara arrancar una casa de sus cimientos. Él la cogió por los hombros y la hizo sentarse de nuevo en su silla. Su mirada inexorable la sometió y su delgado dedo índice se movió admonitorio ante ella como si hiciera callar a un niño rebelde.

- Abraza a Frank -dijo-, no a mí. Aún no he terminado contigo; cuando lo haya hecho, podrás darme la mano si te apetece. Espera y serénate.

Se separó de ella. Volvió a meter las manos en los bolsillos y reanudó su monótona marcha de un lado a otro.

- ¿Lista? -preguntó, deteniéndose después de un rato. Ella intentó contestar-. Tómate dos minutos más -dijo él y reemprendió sus paseos con la regularidad de un reloj. Éstas son las criaturas, pensó, en las que hombres, por lo demás sensatos, depositan la felicidad de su vida. ¿Hay algún otro objeto en la creación, me pregunto, que sirva peor a su propósito que una mujer?

Se detuvo ante ella una vez más. Magdalen respiraba con mayor facilidad; el intenso rubor de sus mejillas empezaba a disiparse.

- ¿Lista? -repitió él-. Sí, lista por fin. Escúchame y terminemos con esto. No te pido que renuncies a Frank. Te pido que esperes.

- Esperaré -dijo ella-. Pacientemente, de buena gana.

- ¿Harás esperar a Frank?

- Sí.

- ¿Lo enviarás a la China?

La cabeza de Magdalen cayó sobre su pecho; sus manos volvieron a enlazarse en silencio. El señor Clare comprendió dónde estaba la dificultad y la abordó directamente sin más rodeos.

- No pretendo entrar en tus sentimientos hacia Frank, ni en los de Frank hacia ti -dijo-. Eso no me interesa. Lo que sí pretendo es establecer dos sencillas verdades. Es la pura verdad que no podéis casaros hasta que tengáis dinero suficiente para pagar el techo que os cobije, las ropas que os cubran y las vituallas que comáis. Es otra verdad que no tenéis ese dinero, que yo no tengo ese dinero y que la única posibilidad de que Frank lo tenga depende de que se vaya a la China. Si yo le digo que vaya, se sentará en un rincón a llorar. Si insisto, dirá que sí y me engañará. Si voy más allá y le acompaño personalmente hasta que se embarque, se escabullirá en el bote del práctico y volverá a escondidas a ti. Es su carácter.

- ¡No! -exclamó Magdalen-. No es su carácter, es su amor hacia mí.

- Llámalo como quieras -replicó el señor Clare-. Sea por cobardía o por cariño, es demasiado escurridizo para que lo retengan mis dedos. Que yo le cierre la puerta no le impedirá volver. Que lo hagas tú, sí. ¿Tienes valor para cerrarla? ¿Le quieres lo suficiente para no impedir su fortuna?

- ¡Si le quiero! ¡Moriría por él!

- ¿Lo enviarás a la China?

Ella suspiró con amargura.

- Tenga piedad de mí -dijo-. He perdido a mi padre, he perdido a mi madre, he perdido mi fortuna, y ahora voy a perder a Frank. A usted no le gustan las mujeres, lo sé, pero intente ayudarme con un poco de piedad. No digo que no sea beneficioso para él enviarlo a la China, sólo digo que es duro, muy, muy duro para mí.

El señor Clare había hecho oídos sordos al ardor de Magdalen, había sido insensible a sus caricias, ciego a sus lágrimas, pero bajo el duro integumento de su filosofía tenía un corazón que reaccionó ante aquella súplica desesperanzada, que se conmovió ante aquellas palabras.

- No niego la dureza de tu caso -dijo-. No quiero hacerlo aún más duro, sólo te pido que por el bien de Frank hagas lo que él es demasiado débil para hacer por sí mismo. No es culpa tuya, no es culpa mía, pero no es menos cierto que la fortuna que tú deberías haberle proporcionado ha cambiado de dueño.

Ella alzó la vista de repente con un brillo furtivo en los ojos, con una mirada amenazadora en los labios.

- Podría volver a cambiar de dueño -dijo.

El señor Clare vio alterarse su fisonomía y oyó el tono de su voz, pero Magdalen había pronunciado estas palabras en voz baja, como si las dijera para sí, y no llegaron al otro extremo de la habitación. El señor Clare dejó de pasearse inmediatamente y le preguntó qué había dicho.

- Nada -respondió Magdalen, volviendo la cabeza hacia la ventana para mirar la lluvia como una autómata-. Sólo mis propios pensamientos.

El señor Clare reemprendió su paseo y volvió a su tema.

- Debe irse -prosiguió-, no sólo en beneficio suyo, sino también en el tuyo. En la China podría ganar dinero suficiente para casarse contigo; aquí no puede. Si se queda aquí, será la ruina de ambos. Cerrará los ojos a toda prudencia y te acosará hasta que te cases con él, y cuando haya conseguido su objetivo, será el primero en arrepentirse y en quejarse de que eres una carga para él. ¡Escúchame bien! Tu estás enamorada de Frank, yo no, y le conozco. Juntaos el tiempo suficiente, dale el tiempo suficiente para abrazar, lloriquear, acosar y suplicar, y te diré cuál será el resultado: te casarás con él.

Por fin había pulsado la tecla correcta, que sonó antes de que pudiera añadir una palabra más.

- Usted no me conoce -dijo Magdalen con firmeza-. No sabe lo que puedo llegar a sufrir por el bien de Frank. Jamás me casaré con él hasta que sea para él lo que mi padre dijo que debería ser: su fortuna. No recibirá ninguna carga cuando me tome a mí, ¡se lo prometo! Seré su ángel de la guarda; no me casaré con él sin aportar un penique para arrastrarle a la ruina. -Dejó su asiento de pronto, avanzó unos cuantos pasos hacia el señor Clare y se detuvo en medio de la habitación. Los brazos le cayeron con impotencia a los lados y rompió a llorar-. Se irá -dijo-. ¡Aunque se me rompa el corazón al hacerlo, mañana le diré que debemos decirnos adiós!

El señor Clare se acercó a ella inmediatamente y le tendió la mano.

- Yo te ayudaré -dijo-. Frank sabrá todo lo que se ha dicho aquí. Cuando venga mañana, sabrá de antemano que viene para decirte adiós.

Magdalen cogió su mano entre las suyas, vaciló, lo miró, y la apretó contra su pecho.

- ¿Puedo pedirle un favor antes de que se vaya? -preguntó tímidamente. Él intentó desasirse, pero ella conocía sus ventajas y la sujetó con fuerza-. Suponga que se produce un cambio para mejor -prosiguió-. Suponga que pudiera ser para Frank lo que mi padre dijo que debería ser...

Antes de que pudiera completar la frase, el señor Clare hizo un segundo esfuerzo y retiró su mano.

- ¿Lo que tu padre dijo que debería ser? -repitió, mirándola atentamente.

- Sí -respondió ella-. A veces ocurren cosas extrañas. Si esas cosas extrañas me ocurren a mí, ¿dejará usted que Frank vuelva antes de que se cumplan los cinco años?

¿Qué quería decir? ¿Se aferraba acaso desesperadamente a la esperanza de ablandar el corazón de Michael Vanstone? El señor Clare no consiguió sacar ninguna otra conclusión de lo que acababa de oír. Al principio de la entrevista la hubiera desengañado con rudeza. Al final de ésta, dejó compasivamente que siguiera engañada.

- Tu esperanza es en vano -dijo-, pero si eso te da valor, sigue esperando. Si esa imposible buena fortuna te llegara, dímelo y Frank volverá. Mientras tanto...

- Mientras tanto -le interrumpió ella con tristeza-, tiene usted mi promesa.

Una vez más los penetrantes ojos del señor Clare examinaron su rostro atentamente.

- Confiaré en tu promesa -dijo-. Verás a Frank mañana.

Ella volvió a su silla pensativamente y se sentó de nuevo en silencio. El señor Clare se dirigió a la puerta antes de que pudieran intercambiar una despedida formal. «¡Impenetrable! -pensó, volviéndose a mirarla antes de salir-. ¡Sólo tiene dieciocho años y es impenetrable para mí!»

En el vestíbulo encontró a Norah, que aguardaba con impaciencia para enterarse de lo ocurrido.

- ¿Ha terminado todo? -preguntó-. ¿Se irá Frank a la China?

- Ten cuidado en cómo diriges a esa hermana tuya -dijo el señor Clare sin prestar atención a la pregunta-. Tiene una gran desgracia contra la que luchar: no está hecha para la rutina ordinaria de la vida de una mujer. No alcanzo a ver el fondo de su bondad o su maldad. Tan sólo te aviso de que su futuro será fuera de lo común.

Una hora después, el señor Pendril abandonó la casa; con el correo de esa noche, la señorita Garth despachó una carta a su hermana de Londres.

FIN DE LA PRIMERA ESCENA

ENTREACTO

DESARROLLO DE LA HISTORIA A TRAVÉS DEL CORREO

I

DE NORAH VANSTONE AL SEÑOR PENDRIL

Westmoreland House, Kensington,

14 de agosto de 1846

Querido señor Pendril:

La fecha de esta carta le demostrará que se ha producido la última de un largo número de despedidas dolorosas. Hemos abandonado Combe-Raven; hemos dicho adiós a nuestro hogar.

He estado pensando seriamente en lo que me dijo el miércoles antes de que volviera a la ciudad. Estoy completamente de acuerdo con usted en que la señorita Garth se ha alterado más de lo que ella misma está dispuesta a admitir con lo que ha sufrido por nuestra causa, y en que es mi deber, en el futuro y en la medida de lo posible, ahorrarle cuantas inquietudes se refieran a mi hermana y a mí. Será hacer muy poco por nuestra más querida amiga, nuestra segunda madre. En cualquier caso, lo haré con todo mi corazón.

Pero perdóneme por decirle que sigo discrepando por completo de usted en lo tocante a Magdalen. Soy tan consciente de la importancia de su ayuda en la situación de desvalimiento en que nos hallamos y estoy tan deseosa por merecer el interés del fiel consejero y más antiguo amigo de mi padre que me siento sinceramente decepcionada conmigo misma por discrepar de usted; sin embargo, discrepo. Magdalen es muy extraña e inexplicable para quienes no la conocen íntimamente. Comprendo que ella misma le ha engañado de manera involuntaria y que se ha mostrado, quizá, bajo su aspecto menos favorable; pero que la clave de su lenguaje y su conducta el miércoles pasado se halle en el sentimiento hacia el hombre que nos ha arruinado, tal como usted insinuó, es algo que no puedo ni quiero creer de mi hermana. Si usted conociera como yo la naturaleza tan noble que tiene, no se sorprendería por esta obstinada resistencia mía en contra de su opinión. ¿Intentará usted cambiarla? No me importa lo que diga el señor Clare; él no cree en nada. Pero concedo una grandísima importancia a lo que usted dice y, aun conociendo la nobleza de sus motivos, me aflige pensar que comete usted una injusticia con Magdalen.

Tras haber aliviado mi espíritu con esta confesión, puedo pasar ahora al motivo real de mi carta. Prometí que, si usted no disponía de tiempo libre para visitarnos hoy, le escribiría para contarle lo que ocurrió después de que se marchara. El día de hoy ha pasado sin que le hayamos visto, así pues, abro mi estuche de papel de cartas y cumplo con mi promesa.

Lamento decir que tres de las sirvientas -la camarera, la pinche de cocina e incluso nuestra doncella personal (hacia la que estoy segura de haber mostrado siempre nuestra bondad)- se aprovecharon de que usted les había pagado el salario para hacer

las maletas y marcharse tan pronto como les volvió la espalda. Vinieron a despedirse con tanta ceremonia y tan poca sinceridad como si abandonaran la casa en circunstancias normales. La cocinera, pese a su carácter violento, se comportó de manera muy diferente: nos envió mensaje de que se quedaría a ayudarnos hasta el final. Y Thomas (que nunca ha estado en ninguna otra casa aparte de la nuestra) habló con tanta gratitud de la invariable bondad de mi querido padre hacia él y pidió con tanta vehemencia que le permitiéramos seguir sirviéndonos mientras duraran sus pequeños ahorros, que Magdalen y yo olvidamos toda formalidad y le estrechamos la mano. El pobre muchacho salió llorando de la habitación. Le deseo lo mejor; espero que encuentre un buen amo y una buena colocación.

La noche larga, tranquila y lluviosa -nuestra última noche en Combe-Raven- fue una triste prueba para nosotras. Creo que el tiempo invernal hubiera pesado menos en nuestro ánimo: las cortinas cerradas, las lámparas encendidas y los amigables fuegos nos hubieran ayudado. En la casa sólo quedábamos cinco personas en total, ¡cuando éramos tantos en otro tiempo! No tengo palabras para expresar lo triste que era la tenue luz del día hacia las siete de la tarde con las habitaciones vacías y la escalera silenciosa. Sin duda la preferencia por las largas tardes estivales debe de ser un prejuicio de las gentes felices. Hicimos lo que pudimos, manteniéndonos ocupadas con la ayuda de la señorita Garth. La perspectiva de prepararlo todo para nuestra partida, que tan terrible nos había parecido por la mañana, se transformó en un refugio donde huir de nosotras mismas a medida que avanzaba la tarde. Al principio intentamos preparar el equipaje por separado, cada una en su propia habitación, pero no pudimos soportar la soledad. Llevamos abajo todas nuestras pertenencias y las amontonamos sobre la gran mesa del comedor para hacer los preparativos juntas en la misma estancia. Estoy segura de que no nos hemos llevado nada que no nos perteneciera.

Después de haberle mencionado mi convicción de que Magdalen no era ella misma cuando usted la vio el miércoles, me siento tentada a detenerme aquí para darle un ejemplo que lo pruebe. El pequeño incidente ocurrió el miércoles por la noche, poco antes de que subiéramos a acostarnos.

Tras haber empaquetado nuestros vestidos y regalos de cumpleaños, nuestros libros y nuestras partituras, nos pusimos a clasificar las cartas que se habían mezclado al colocarlo todo sobre la mesa. Algunas de mis cartas estaban mezcladas con las de Magdalen y algunas de las suyas con las mías. Entre estas últimas encontré la tarjeta que le entregó un actor que había dirigido una función teatral de aficionados en la que ella tomó parte a principios de año. Ese hombre le había dado la tarjeta con su nombre y dirección en la creencia de que mi hermana sería invitada a participar en muchos más entretenimientos de esa índole y con la esperanza de que ella le recomendaría como supervisor en futuras ocasiones. Me limito a mencionar estos detalles insignificantes para demostrarle lo poco de que podía servirnos guardar una tarjeta como ésa en circunstancias como las nuestras. Naturalmente, la arrojé lejos de mí por encima de la mesa con la intención de tirarla al suelo. Cayó a poca distancia, cerca del lugar donde se sentaba Magdalen. Ella la recogió, la miró e inmediatamente declaró que no quería perder aquella tarjeta absolutamente inútil por nada del mundo. Casi se enfadó conmigo por haberla tirado ¡y también con la señorita Garth, por preguntar para qué podía quererla! ¿Puede haber prueba más clara que ésta de que nuestras desgracias -que han caído sobre ella con mucha mayor fuerza que sobre mí- la han desquiciado y agotado por completo? No creo que debamos interpretar mal sus palabras y su actitud cuando no es dueña de sí misma para ejercer su buen juicio natural, cuando muestra la susceptibilidad de un niño sobre un asunto que carece de la más mínima importancia.

Un poco después de las once subimos con la intención de descansar.

Descorrí la cortina de mi ventana y miré al exterior. Oh, qué cruel fue aquella última noche; no había luna ni estrellas; la oscuridad era tan profunda que ni uno solo de los queridos objetos familiares del jardín me fue visible cuando los busqué; la quietud era tan total ¡que mis propios movimientos por la habitación casi consiguieron atemorizarme! Intenté acostarme y dormir, pero volvió la sensación de soledad y no pude sobreponerme. Dirá usted que con veintiséis años tengo edad suficiente para saber dominarme. No sé muy bien cómo ocurrió, pero entré sigilosamente en el cuarto

de Magdalen igual que solía entrar hace muchos años, cuando éramos niñas. No estaba en la cama; estaba sentada frente a su recado de escribir, pensando. Le dije que quería pasar con ella la última noche; ella me besó, me dijo que me acostara y prometió reunirse conmigo en seguida. Me tranquilicé y me dormí. Era de día cuando me desperté, y lo primero que vi fue a Magdalen sentada aún, pensando. No se había acostado, no había dormido en toda la noche.

«Dormiré cuando hayamos abandonado Combe-Raven -dijo-. Me sentiré mejor cuando todo haya acabado y me haya despedido de Frank.» Tenía en la mano el testamento de nuestro padre y la carta que le escribió a usted; cuando terminó de hablar, me encomendó ambos. Yo era la mayor (dijo) y debía guardar esas preciosas reliquias. Intenté sugerirle que las dividiéramos, pero ella negó con la cabeza. «He copiado -fue su respuesta-, todo lo que dice de nosotras en el testamento y toda la carta». Esto fue lo que me dijo, y se sacó del pecho una bolsita de seda blanca que había confeccionado durante la noche y en la que había metido los extractos para llevarlos siempre consigo. «Esto me dice en sus propias palabras cuáles fueron sus últimos deseos para nosotras, y es lo único que quiero para el futuro», dijo.

Todo esto son nimiedades y casi me sorprendo de mí misma por no avergonzarme de molestarle con ellas. Pero desde que conozco la temprana relación que tuvo usted con mi padre y mi madre he aprendido a pensar en usted (y supongo que también a escribirle) como en un viejo amigo. Además, tengo tanto empeño en cambiar su opinión sobre Magdalen que no puedo evitar contarle las más pequeñas insignificancias sobre ella, lo cual, a mi parecer, podría hacerle llegar a pensar de ella lo mismo que yo.

Cuando llegó la hora del desayuno (el jueves por la mañana) nos sorprendió hallar una extraña carta sobre la mesa. Quizá debería comentársela por si acaso fuera precisa su intervención en el futuro. Estaba dirigida a la señorita Garth en papel con orla negra, y el que la mandaba era el mismo hombre que nos siguió un día de la primavera pasada cuando volvíamos paseando a casa: el capitán Wragge. Su propósito era, al parecer, afirmar una vez más la audaz reclamación de su parentesco con mi pobre madre con el pretexto de una carta de pésame que en semejante persona era una insolencia enviarnos. En ella expresa tanta simpatía -al descubrir nuestra desgracia en el periódico- como si realmente hubiera sido uno de nuestros íntimos y solicita saber en una postdata (ignorando evidentemente todo lo que ha ocurrido en realidad) ¡si se considera deseable que él esté presente con los demás familiares en la lectura del testamento! La dirección a la que se le pueden enviar las cartas durante la próxima quincena es «Oficina de Correos, Birmingham». Esto es todo lo que tengo que decirle sobre el asunto. Tanto la carta como el que la escribió me parecen indignos de que le prestemos la menor atención, ni usted ni nosotras.

Después del desayuno Magdalen nos dejó y se retiró a la salita. Dado que seguía lloviendo, habíamos dispuesto que Francis Clare la vería en aquella habitación cuando se presentara para despedirse. Yo estaba arriba cuando llegó y arriba me quedé más de media hora, tristemente preocupada, como bien puede usted imaginar, por Magdalen.

Al cabo de esa media hora o más, bajé. Al llegar al descansillo, oí de pronto la voz de mi hermana que se alzaba suplicante, llamando a Frank por su nombre, luego oí fuertes sollozos y después risas y chillidos aterradores, resonando al mismo tiempo por toda la casa. Al punto corrí a la salita y encontré a Magdalen en el sofá, presa de una violenta histeria, y a Frank de pie mirándola con el rostro ceñudo y enojado, mordiéndose las uñas.

Me sentí tan indignada -sin saber en realidad por qué, pues naturalmente ignoraba lo que había ocurrido en la entrevista- que cogí al señor Francis Clare por los hombros y lo saqué a empellones de la habitación. Le explico con detalle cómo actué con él y qué me impulsó a hacerlo porque tengo entendido que se ha ofendido grandemente y que es probable que mencione en otro lugar lo que él llama violencia impropia de una señorita. Si se lo comentara a usted, estoy dispuesta a admitir que perdí la cabeza, pero espero que no crea que fue sin motivo.

Lo empujé hasta el vestíbulo dejando a Magdalen en manos de la señorita Garth por el

momento. En lugar de marcharse, Frank se sentó con aire malhumorado en una de las sillas del vestíbulo. «¿Puedo preguntar por el motivo de esta extraordinaria violencia?», inquirió con expresión ultrajada. «No -le dije-. Tendrá usted la amabilidad de imaginársela por sí solo y de dejarnos inmediatamente, si no le molesta.» Él se obstinó en seguir sentado mordiéndose las uñas y reflexionando. «¿Qué he hecho yo para ser tratado de esta forma tan despiadada?», preguntó al cabo. «No quiero entrar en discusiones con usted», respondí. «Le pido sólo que se vaya. Si insiste en esperar para ver a mi hermana otra vez, iré yo misma a su casa y apelaré a su padre.» Al oír estas palabras se apresuró a levantarse. «He sido tratado de una forma infame en este asunto -dijo-. Todas las penurias y sacrificios me han tocado a mí. Soy el único entre ustedes que no tiene el corazón de piedra, incluyendo a Magdalen. En un momento me dice que me ama y al siguiente me dice que me vaya a la China. ¿Qué he hecho yo para ser tratado con tan cruel falta de lógica? Yo soy lógico (sólo quiero quedarme en casa), ¿y cuál es la consecuencia?: ¡todos están contra mí!» De ese modo bajó los escalones gruñendo y ésa fue la última vez que lo vi. Eso fue todo lo que ocurrió entre nosotros. Si a usted le ofrece otra versión, lo que diga será falso. No intentó regresar. Una hora después vino su padre solo para despedirse. Nos vio a la señorita Garth y a mí, pero no a Magdalen, y nos dijo que tomaría las medidas oportunas, con la ayuda de usted, para que su hijo sea debidamente vigilado en Londres y se ocupen de que embarque sano y salvo en el buque cuando llegue el momento. Fue una visita corta y una triste despedida. Incluso el señor Clare lo lamentaba, aunque se esforzó por disimularlo.

Apenas quedaban dos horas para la partida después de que se fuera el señor Clare. Fui a ver de nuevo a Magdalen y la encontré más calmada y mejor, aunque terriblemente pálida y exhausta, y agobiada, me pareció, por pensamientos que no tuvo ánimos de comunicarme. No quiso decirme nada entonces -y nada me ha dicho después- sobre lo que pasó entre ella y el señor Francis Clare. Cuando hablé de él airadamente (en la creencia de que había acongojado y atormentado a mi hermana en un momento en que debería haberle proporcionado todo el aliento y consuelo de que un hombre es capaz), ella se negó a escucharme. Mostró la más bondadosa indulgencia hacia él y las más cariñosas excusas, y se culpó a sí misma enteramente del horrible estado en que la había encontrado. ¿Me equivocaba al afirmar que su naturaleza es noble? ¿No cambiará usted de opinión cuando lea estas líneas?

No teníamos amigos que vinieran a decirnos adiós y los escasos conocidos vivían demasiado lejos -quizá les éramos demasiado indiferentes- para venir. Empleamos el poco tiempo de ocio de que disponíamos en recorrer la casa juntas por última vez. Nos despedimos de nuestra vieja aula, de nuestros dormitorios, de la habitación en que murió nuestra madre, del pequeño estudio en el que mi padre solía ocuparse de las cuentas y la correspondencia, sintiendo hacia esos lugares, en nuestra triste situación, lo que otras jóvenes podrían sentir al separarse de viejos amigos. De la casa salimos al jardín durante un intervalo de buen tiempo y recogimos nuestro último ramillete de flores con el propósito de secarlas cuando empezaran a marchitarse y guardarlas como recuerdo de los días felices que se han ido para siempre. Cuando acabamos de despedirnos del jardín, sólo nos quedaba media hora. Fuimos juntas a la tumba, nos arrodillamos en silencio una junto a otra y besamos el suelo sagrado. Creí que mi corazón se partiría en mil pedazos. Agosto era el mes en que cumplía años mi madre, y el año pasado por esta época, mi padre, Magdalen y yo debatíamos en secreto qué regalo podíamos hacerle para sorprenderla en la mañana de su cumpleaños.

Si hubiera visto usted cómo sufría Magdalen, jamás volvería a dudar de ella. Tuve que llevármela del lugar de reposo eterno de mis padres casi a la fuerza. Antes de que saliéramos del cementerio, se desasió y volvió corriendo. Se dejó caer de hinojos junto a la tumba, arrancó con ardor un puñado de hierba al tiempo que decía algo en voz baja, pero aunque la seguí al instante no estaba lo bastante cerca para oírlo. Se volvió hacia mí con tal frenesí cuando intenté alzarla del suelo, me miró con una ferocidad tal, que viéndola me sentí absolutamente aterrorizada. Para mi alivio, el paroxismo la abandonó tan de repente como la había poseído. Se metió el puñado de hierba en la pechera del vestido, me cogió del brazo y salió presurosa del cementerio conmigo. Le pregunté para qué había vuelto; le pregunté qué había dicho junto a la tumba. «Una promesa a nuestro difunto padre», contestó, recuperando momentáneamente la mirada feroz y las maneras

frenéticas que antes me habían sobresaltado. Temía alterarla si insistía; dejé las preguntas para un momento más apropiado y tranquilo. Por lo que le cuento, comprenderá usted cuan horriblemente sufre mi hermana, de qué modo tan extraño y enloquecido actúa cuando es presa de una violenta agitación, y no interpretará mal lo que dijo o hizo cuando la vio el miércoles pasado.

Llegamos a la casa con tiempo apenas de partir precipitadamente para no perder el tren. Quizá fuera mejor así; mejor que dispusiéramos apenas de un instante para volver la vista atrás antes de que la curva de la carretera ocultara Combe-Raven a nuestra vista. En la estación no había una sola alma conocida; nadie reparó en nosotras, nadie nos dijo adiós. La lluvia empezaba a caer de nuevo cuando ocupamos nuestros asientos en el tren. No puedo, no oso contarle lo que sentimos al ver el ferrocarril, ni los horribles recuerdos que acudieron a nuestro pensamiento sobre la calamidad que nos ha dejado huérfanas. He procurado con todas mis fuerzas evitar el tono pesimista en esta carta, pues no quería devolverle toda la bondad que nos ha mostrado apenándole con nuestro dolor. Tal vez me haya entretenido demasiado en la pequeña historia de nuestra partida. Sólo puedo aducir como disculpa que no hay lugar en mi corazón para nada más y que lo que no está en mi corazón, no lo escribirá mi pluma.

Llevamos tan poco tiempo en nuestro nuevo domicilio que no tengo nada más que contarle, excepto que la hermana de la señorita Garth nos ha recibido con la más sincera amabilidad. Tiene el tacto de dejarnos a nuestro aire hasta que nos hallemos mejor dispuestas para pensar en nuestros planes de futuro y para hacer lo posible por ganarnos el sustento. La casa es tan grande y la posición de nuestras habitaciones ha sido tan cuidadosamente elegida que apenas noto -salvo cuando oigo las risas de las más pequeñas en el jardín- que vivimos en un colegio.

Con los mejores deseos de la señorita Garth y de mi hermana, querido señor Pendril, y mi profundo agradecimiento,

NORAH VANSTONE

II

DE LA SEÑORITA GARTH AL SEÑOR PENDRIL

Westmoreland House,

Kensington, 23 de septiembre de 1846

Mi querido señor:

Escribo estas líneas con una congoja imposible de describir con palabras. Magdalen nos ha abandonado. A hora temprana ha dejado la casa en secreto esta mañana y nada sabemos de ella desde entonces.

Quisiera verle y hablar con usted personalmente, pero no me atrevo a dejar a Norah. Debo dominarme; debo intentar escribir.

Nada ocurrió ayer que nos previniera, a mí o a Norah, sobre esta última -he estado a punto de escribir la peor- de nuestras desgracias. El único cambio que notamos en la desdichada joven fue una mejoría cuando nos deseamos buenas noches. Me dio un beso, cosa que no hacía últimamente, y rompió a llorar cuando abrazó a su hermana a continuación. Tan poco sospechábamos la verdad que tomamos estos signos de renovado cariño y afecto por una promesa de mejores perspectivas para el futuro.

Esta mañana, cuando su hermana ha entrado en su habitación, la ha encontrado vacía y sobre el tocador había una nota de su puño y letra dirigida a Norah. No he conseguido convencer a Norah de que se separe de la nota, de modo que sólo puedo enviarle la copia que le adjunto. Verá usted que no proporciona pista alguna sobre la dirección que ha tomado Magdalen.

Consciente de que el tiempo apremia en esta terrible emergencia, he examinado la habitación y (con ayuda de mi hermana) he interrogado a los criados en cuanto he sabido de la ausencia de Magdalen. Su guardarropa estaba vacío, al igual que todos sus baúles menos uno, que evidentemente se ha llevado consigo. Creemos que ha vendido sus vestidos y sus joyas en secreto, que ayer hizo sacar de la casa el único baúl que se ha llevado y que ella se ha ido esta mañana a pie. Las respuestas que nos ha dado una de las criadas son tan poco satisfactorias que estamos convencidas de que Magdalen la sobornó para que la ayudara y de que la mujer ha dispuesto todo lo necesario para la huida que a ella no le habría sido posible llevar a cabo por sí sola sin ser descubierta.

Sobre el propósito inmediato con el que nos ha abandonado, no me cabe la menor duda.

Tengo razones (que puedo explicarle en un momento más oportuno) para estar segura de que se ha ido con la intención de probar fortuna en los escenarios. Tiene en su poder la tarjeta de un actor de profesión que supervisó una función teatral de aficionados en Clifton en la que ella tomó parte, y a él ha acudido en busca de ayuda. Yo vi la tarjeta en su momento y sé que el actor se llama Huxtable. La dirección no la recuerdo exactamente, pero estoy casi segura de que era algún lugar relacionado con el teatro en Bow Street, Covent Garden. Le suplico que no pierda un solo momento para enviar a alguien a realizar las pesquisas pertinentes; creo firmemente que el primer indicio de sus intenciones se hallará en esa dirección.

Si no tuviéramos nada peor que temer que su intento de convertirse en actriz, no sentiría la consternación y la congoja que ahora me domina. Cientos de muchachas han obrado con igual temeridad y no han acabado mal después de todo. Pero mis temores

sobre Magdalen no empiezan y terminan con el riesgo que corre ahora.

Hay algo que me ronda la cabeza desde que salimos de Combe-Raven, mucho más en las seis últimas semanas que al principio. Hasta el momento en que Francis Clare abandonó Inglaterra, estoy segura de que Magdalen mantenía la secreta esperanza de que él haría lo posible por volver a verla. Desde el día en que supo que las medidas que usted había adoptado para impedirlo habían tenido éxito, desde el día en que se convenció de que el buque se lo había llevado lejos, nada ha despertado su interés. Se ha abandonado cada vez con mayor desesperación a sus propios pensamientos, pensamientos que en mi opinión se formaron por primera vez el día en que se enteró de que los planes de los que dependía su matrimonio se habían malogrado por completo. Ha trazado algún loco plan para disputar la fortuna de su padre a Michael Vanstone y ha huido para hacerse actriz únicamente como medio de librarse de toda dependencia, lo que le permitirá arrostrar cuantos peligros guste totalmente a salvo del control familiar. Dejo a usted que imagine lo que me cuesta escribirle estas palabras. Ha pasado el tiempo en que pueda importarme consideración alguna sobre mis propios sentimientos. Todo cuanto pueda decir que sirva para abrirle los ojos al auténtico peligro y refuerce su convicción de la urgente necesidad de alejarlo, lo digo a mi pesar sin vacilación ni reservas de ningún tipo.

Una palabra más y habré concluido.

La última vez que tuvo usted la amabilidad de venir a esta casa, ¿recuerda cómo nos violentó y afligió Magdalen interrogándole sobre el derecho que tenía a llevar el apellido de su padre? ¿Recuerda que insistió en sus preguntas hasta que le obligó a admitir que, legalmente hablando, ella y su hermana carecen de apellido? Me permito recordárselo porque usted tiene cientos de clientes en los que pensar y bien pudiera ser que hubiera olvidado tal circunstancia. Sin duda aquella conversación con usted barrió cualquier reticencia natural a engañarnos y a rebajarse a sí misma con la adopción de un nombre falso, que hubiese podido adoptar Magdalen. Tenemos que encontrarla mediante una descripción de su persona; no podemos seguirle el rastro de ningún otro modo.

No se me ocurre nada más que pueda orientarle en esta deplorable emergencia. Por amor de Dios, no ahorre medios ni energías. Debería recibir mi carta antes de las diez de esta mañana. Envíeme unas líneas de respuesta para asegurarme que emprenderá en seguida las acciones oportunas. Mi única esperanza de tranquilizar a Norah es mostrarle unas palabras de aliento de su pluma. Dándole las gracias, le saluda atentamente,

HARRIET GARTH

III

DE MAGDALEN A NORAH (ADJUNTA A LA CARTA ANTERIOR)

Querida mía:

Intenta perdonarme. He luchado contra mí misma hasta quedar rendida por el esfuerzo. Soy la más desdichada de todas las criaturas. Nuestra tranquila vida aquí me enloquece; no puedo soportarlo más, debo marcharme. Si supieras qué pensamientos tengo, si supieras cuánto los he combatido y de qué modo tan horrible han seguido obsesionándome en la solitaria quietud de esta casa, sentirías lástima por mí y me perdonarías. ¡Oh, cariño mío, no te sientas ofendida por que no te abra mi corazón como debería! No me atrevo. No me atrevo a mostrarme a ti como realmente soy.

Te ruego que no envíes a nadie a buscarme. Te escribiré y aliviaré todas tus inquietudes. Ya sabes, Norah, que tenemos que ganarnos la vida; sólo me voy para ganarme la mía del modo para el que estoy más capacitada. Tanto si lo logro como si fracaso, ningún daño puedo hacerme. No tengo posición social que perder ni apellido que envilecer. No dudes de que te quiero; no permitas que la señorita Garth dude de mi gratitud. Me voy desolada por dejaros, pero debo hacerlo. Si os hubiera querido menos, tal vez habría tenido valor para deciros esto en persona, pero ¿cómo confiar en que podría resistirme a vuestra persuasión y soportar ver vuestra congoja? ¡Adiós, querida mía! Recibe un millar de besos y todo mi amor hasta que volvamos a vernos.

IV

DEL SARGENTO BULMER (DE LA POLICÍA) AL SEÑOR PENDRIL

Scotland Yard,

29 de septiembre de 1846

Señor:

Su pasante me informa de que las partes interesadas en nuestra investigación sobre la señorita desaparecida están impacientes por tener noticias de la misma. Hoy he ido a su bufete para hablar sobre este asunto. No habiéndole encontrado en él y dado que no me será posible volver a intentarlo mañana, le escribo estas líneas para evitar demoras y decirle cuál es la situación hasta el momento.

Lamento comunicarle que no se ha producido avance alguno desde mi último informe. El rastro de la señorita que descubrimos hace casi una semana sigue siendo la última pista de que disponemos. Este caso podría parecer simple para un observador externo, pero visto de cerca empeora considerablemente y se convierte, para serle sincero, en un problema de difícil solución.

La situación es como sigue:

Hemos seguido la pista de la señorita hasta el agente teatral de Bow Street. Sabemos que a hora temprana de la mañana del veintitrés llamaron al agente mientras se vestía y tuvo que bajar a hablar con la señorita que aguardaba en un coche de alquiler frente a su puerta. Sabemos que al serle mostrada la tarjeta del señor Huxtable, escribió en ella la dirección de dicho señor en el campo y oyó que la joven ordenaba al cochero que la llevara a la estación de Great Northern. Creemos que cogió el tren de las nueve. La seguimos en el tren de las doce. Hemos averiguado que llegó al alojamiento del señor Huxtable a las dos y media, que allí se enteró de que no lo esperaban hasta las ocho de la tarde, que dejó dicho que volvería a esa hora y que no regresó. El señor Huxtable afirma que la señorita y él no se han visto. La primera cuestión que se plantea es: ¿debemos creer al señor Huxtable? He hecho averiguaciones sobre su carácter; sé de él tanto o más que él mismo, y en mi opinión debemos creerle. Según mis informes, es un hombre absolutamente honrado.

Aquí, pues, estriba la dificultad del asunto. La señorita se fue con un propósito determinado. En lugar de seguir hasta cumplirlo, se detiene cuando lo tiene a su alcance. ¿Por qué se ha detenido y dónde? Desgraciadamente éstas son las preguntas para las que aún no tenemos respuesta.

Mi opinión sobre el tema es brevemente la siguiente: no creo que haya sufrido ningún accidente grave. En nueve casos de cada diez, los accidentes graves salen a la luz por sí solos. Mi teoría es que ha caído en manos de una persona o personas que están interesadas en ocultarla y que tienen la sagacidad suficiente para conseguirlo. Por el momento no puedo decir si está con ellos de buen grado o por la fuerza. No deseo crear falsas esperanzas ni falsos temores; deseo detenerme en la opinión que ya he expresado. Con respecto al futuro, puedo decirle que he dejado allí a uno de mis hombres en comunicación diaria con las autoridades. También me he encargado de que circulen ampliamente los carteles ofreciendo una recompensa para quien dé noticia de su paradero. Finalmente, he dispuesto todo lo necesario para que se vigilen los carteles anunciadores de todos los teatros de provincias, así como a las compañías teatrales. Hace algunos años esto hubiera supuesto un gasto considerable de tiempo y dinero. Afortunadamente para el caso que nos ocupa, los teatros de provincias se encuentran en situación precaria. Excepto en las grandes ciudades, apenas queda teatro abierto, por lo que podremos vigilarlos todos con poco gasto y menos dificultades.

Éstos son los pasos que he considerado útil tomar por el momento. Si usted opina de otra manera, sólo tiene que darme sus indicaciones y yo las atenderé con la mayor diligencia. No desespero en modo alguno de encontrar a la señorita y de devolverla sana y salva a sus amigas. Le ruego que así se lo comunique a ellas. Reciba un respetuoso saludo,

ABRAHAM BULMER

V

CARTA ANÓNIMA DIRIGIDA AL SEÑOR PENDRIL

Señor:

Una llamada a la sensatez. Los amigos de cierta señorita están perdiendo tiempo y dinero inútilmente. Su pasante de confianza y su detective de la policía están buscando una aguja en un pajar. Al día de hoy, nueve de octubre, aún no la han encontrado; antes encontrarían el paso del Noroeste. Aleje a sus sabuesos y quizá tenga noticias sobre la seguridad de la señorita de su puño y letra. Cuanto más tiempo dediquen a buscarla, más tiempo permanecerá como está ahora: perdida.

(La carta va precedida de una nota escrita por el señor Pendril:

«No hay medio aparente de seguir -el rastro de la carta adjunta hasta su remitente. Matasellos: «Charing Cross». Marca del papel del interior del sobre, cortada. Letra, seguramente de hombre, disimulada. Quienquiera que la escribió está correctamente informado. No se ha descubierto aún pista alguna de la menor de las señoritas Vanstone».)

LA SEGUNDA ESCENA

Skeldergate, York

CAPÍTULO I

En esa parte de la ciudad de York que está situada en la orilla oeste del Ouse, hay una calle estrecha, llamada Skeldergate, que discurre paralela al curso del río casi de norte a sur. La poterna a través de la cual se accedía otrora a Skeldergate ya no existe y las pocas casas antiguas que quedan en la calle ostentan un melancólico disfraz moderno de cal y cemento. Tiendas de lo más pequeño y mísero, mezcladas aquí y allá con sórdidos almacenes y tristes residencias privadas de ladrillo rojo, componen el aspecto actual de Skeldergate. Junto a la orilla del río las casas están separadas a intervalos por callejas que discurren hacia el agua y dejan al descubierto pequeños y solitarios terrenos más allá de los cuales se alzan los mástiles de las gabarras fluviales. En su extremo sur la calle termina de repente y el caudaloso cauce del Ouse, los árboles, las praderas, el paseo en una orilla y el camino de los remolcadores en la otra se abren a la vista.

Aquí, donde termina la calle y en el lado más alejado del río, una angosta calleja asciende hasta el sendero pavimentado que corona los antiguos muros de York. La única y corta hilera de edificios que ocupa la calleja está compuesta por casas de huéspedes baratas con vistas, por la parte de atrás y a pocos pasos de distancia, a una parte del grueso muro de la ciudad. El lugar recibe el nombre de Rosemary Lane. Muy poca luz penetra en él; muy pocas personas viven allí; los residentes de Skeldergate pasan de largo y los visitantes que utilizan la triste calleja para subir o bajar del paseo de la muralla se alejan de ella lo antes posible.

La puerta de una de las casas de este rincón perdido de York se abrió suavemente la noche del veintitrés de septiembre de mil ochocientos cuarenta y seis, y un solitario individuo del sexo masculino abandonó lentamente el retiro de Rosemary Lane para entrar en Skeldergate.

Tras girar hacia el norte, esa persona dirigió sus pasos hacia el puente del Ouse y el bullicioso centro de la ciudad. Mostraba la apariencia externa de una pobreza respetable, llevaba un paraguas de guinga protegido por una funda de hule, caminaba esquivando escrupulosamente todos los puntos sucios del pavimento y lo observaba todo con ojos de diferente color: un ojo marrón bilioso al acecho de empleo y un ojo verde bilioso en apuro similar. En pocas palabras, el extraño de Rosemary Lane no era otro que el capitán Wragge.

En lo tocante a su aspecto, el capitán no había cambiado para mejor desde el memorable día de primavera en que se había presentado a la señorita Garth junto a la verja de entrada de Combe-Raven. La efervescencia por los ferrocarriles en aquel famoso año había atacado incluso al cauteloso Wragge, apartándole de sus ocupaciones habituales y dejándole postrado al final, como a tantos otros mejores que él. Había perdido su apariencia clerical; se había secado con las hojas otoñales. La banda de crespón de su sombrero se había puesto de luto marrón por la pérdida del negro. El sucio cuello y el corbatín blancos habían sufrido la muerte del hilo viejo, y habían establecido prolongada residencia en una fábrica de papel para revivir un día como cuadernillos en una papelería. Una chaqueta gris de caza en el último estadio de atrofia de la lana sustituía la levita negra de otros tiempos y, como fiel sirviente, protegía de miradas curiosas el oscuro secreto de la ropa interior de su amo. De los pies a la cabeza, cada centímetro cuadrado de la ropa del capitán había cambiado para peor, pero el hombre permanecía inalterable, inaccesible a toda forma de enmohecimiento moral, impermeable a la acción de la herrumbre social. Era tan cortés, tan persuasivo y

tan mansamente digno como siempre. Llevaba la cabeza tan alta sin cuello de camisa como la había llevado con él. El raído pañuelo negro que rodeaba su cuello estaba dispuesto de manera impecable; sus viejos y podridos zapatos habían recibido una pulcra mano de betún; en cuestión de afeitado, la suavidad de su mentón podía compararse con la de la más alta dignidad eclesiástica de York. El tiempo, los cambios y la pobreza habían atacado al capitán a un tiempo y no habían logrado derribarlo. Recorría las calles de York como un hombre por encima de las ropas y las circunstancias, su barniz truhanesco siempre resplandeciente. Una vez en el puente, el capitán Wragge se detuvo y miró distraídamente por encima del parapeto hacia las gabarras del río. Era evidente que no tenía destino al que arribar ni nada que hacer. Mientras aún seguía ocioso, el reloj de la catedral de York dio las cinco y media. Los coches de alquiler pasaban traqueteando por el puente de camino a la estación para recibir el tren de Londres de las seis menos veinte. Tras una breve vacilación, el capitán siguió los coches de alquiler paseando tranquilamente. Cuando una de las costumbres de un hombre consiste en vivir de sus congéneres, ese hombre es siempre más o menos aficionado a merodear por las grandes estaciones de ferrocarril. El capitán Wragge espigaba en el campo humano y en aquella tarde desocupada la estación de York era tan buen lugar para echar un vistazo como cualquier otro.

Llegó al andén unos minutos después que el tren. Ningún otro lugar como York para ejemplificar de manera notable la absoluta incapacidad de idear medidas administrativas para controlar a grandes muchedumbres, que es una de las características nacionales de los ingleses en lo tocante a la autoridad. Tres líneas diferentes de trenes congregan a tres multitudes de pasajeros de la mañana a la noche bajo el mismo techo, dejando que ocasionen tumultos con toda la ayuda que los desconcertados empleados de la compañía puedan prestarles para aumentar la confusión. El habitual alboroto estaba a punto de alcanzar su punto álgido cuando el capitán Wragge se acercó al andén. Docenas de personas diferentes intentaban alcanzar docenas de objetos diferentes en docenas de direcciones distintas, todos desde un mismo punto de partida e igualmente privados de información. Un súbito hueco en la multitud, cerca de los coches de segunda clase, atrajo la curiosidad del capitán. Se abrió paso y encontró a un hombre decentemente vestido -ayudado por un mozo de estación y un policía- intentando recoger unos carteles impresos, caídos de un paquete que sus frenéticos compañeros de viaje le habían tirado de un golpe.

Ofreciendo su ayuda en aquel accidente con la cortés diligencia que le caracterizaba, el capitán Wragge observó las sorprendentes palabras: «CINCUENTA LIBRAS DE RECOMPENSA», impresas en mayúsculas sobre los carteles que le ayudaba a recuperar, e inmediatamente se guardó a escondidas uno de ellos para examinarlo más detenidamente a la primera oportunidad. Mientras arrugaba el cartel en la palma de la mano, sus ojos bicolores se fijaron con ávido interés en el propietario del infortunado paquete. Cuando da la casualidad de que un hombre no tiene ni cincuenta peniques en el bolsillo, si tiene el corazón donde lo debe tener, le dará un vuelco, y, si su boca está convenientemente formada, se le hará agua, ante la visión de otro hombre que lleve consigo una oferta impresa de cincuenta libras esterlinas dirigida a sus congéneres.

El desdichado viajero envolvió su paquete lo mejor que pudo y se dispuso a abandonar el andén tras hacer una pregunta a la primera víctima oficial del trasiego de pasajeros del día que tenía aún ánimo suficiente para escucharle. Abandonando la estación para dirigirse a la orilla del río, que estaba cerca, el forastero entró en el transbordador junto a la poterna de North Street. El capitán, que había seguido sus pasos con cautela hasta allí, entró también en el transbordador y empleó el corto intervalo del trayecto hasta la orilla opuesta en examinar el cartel que se había guardado para informarse. De espaldas al viajero, el capitán Wragge concentró su atención en las siguientes líneas:

CINCUENTA LIBRAS DE RECOMPENSA

Falta de su casa en Londres una señorita desde primera hora de la mañana del 23 de septiembre de 1846. Edad: dieciocho años. Vestimenta: luto. Físico: cabellos castaños muy claros, cejas y pestañas más oscuras, ojos gris claro, cutis extraordinariamente pálido, parte inferior de la cara amplia y llena, figura alta y erguida, camina con extraordinaria gracia y soltura, habla con franqueza y resolución, tiene los modales y costumbres de una señorita culta y refinada. Marcas personales: dos lunares pequeños juntos en la parte izquierda del cuello. Ropa interior marcada con el nombre «Magdalen Vanstone». Se supone que ha ingresado o ha intentado ingresar con nombre falso en una compañía teatral que actuaba en York en estos momentos. Cuando dejó Londres no llevaba más equipaje que un baúl negro. Quienquiera que dé cualquier información que permita a sus allegados recuperarla recibirá la recompensa arriba mencionada. Diríjanse al despacho del señor Harkness, procurador, Coney Street, York. O a los señores Wyatt, Pendril y Gwilt, Serle Street, Lincoln's Inn, Londres.

Pese a que el capitán Wragge estaba acostumbrado a mantener un dominio absoluto sobre sí mismo en todo tipo de emergencias humanas, su profundo asombro cuando la lectura de la nota le llevó al nombre marcado en la ropa interior de la señorita desaparecida se delató en una exclamación de sorpresa que sobresaltó incluso al barquero. El viajero fue menos observador; tenía fija su atención en la orilla opuesta del río y abandonó el barco apresuradamente en cuanto éste llegó al punto de atraque. El capitán Wragge se recobró, se metió el cartel en el bolsillo y siguió a su guía por segunda vez.

El forastero encaminó sus pasos a la calle más cercana al río, comparó una nota de su cuaderno con los números de las casas de la acera izquierda, se detuvo delante de una de ellas y llamó al timbre. El capitán se dirigió a la casa contigua, fingió llamar al timbre a su vez y dio la espalda al viajero, esperando aparentemente a que le abrieran, pero escuchando en realidad con todo su empeño por si llegaba a sus oídos algún retazo de conversación cuando se abriera la puerta a su espalda.

Alguien abrió la puerta con la debida prontitud y un intercambio de preguntas y respuestas suficientemente instructivo en el umbral recompensó la destreza del capitán Wragge.

- ¿Vive aquí el señor Huxtable? -preguntó el viajero.

- Sí, señor -respondió una voz de mujer.

- ¿Está en casa?

- Ahora no está en casa, señor, pero volverá a las ocho de la tarde.

- Creo que antes ha venido una señorita por aquí, ¿no es cierto?

- Sí, esta tarde ha venido una señorita.

- Exactamente; yo vengo por el mismo asunto. ¿Ha visto ella al señor Huxtable?

- No, señor, lleva fuera todo el día. La señorita me dijo que volvería a las ocho.

- Bien. Vendré y veré al señor Huxtable al mismo tiempo.

- ¿Me deja su nombre, señor?

- No, dígale que un caballero ha venido a verle por un asunto del teatro, eso bastará. Aguarde un momento, por favor. No conozco York, ¿sería usted tan amable de indicarme el camino para Coney Street?

La mujer le dio la información solicitada, la puerta se cerró y el viajero se alejó presuroso en dirección a Coney Street.

En esta ocasión el capitán Wragge no intentó seguirlo. El cartel revelaba claramente que el siguiente objetivo de aquel hombre era completar las disposiciones necesarias con el procurador local sobre la cuestión de la recompensa prometida.

Tras ver y oír lo suficiente para su propósito inmediato, el capitán volvió sobre sus pasos calle abajo, giró a la derecha y entró en el paseo, que en aquel barrio de la ciudad bordea la orilla del río entre los baños y la torre Lendal.

«Este es un asunto de familia», dijo el capitán Wragge para sí, empecinándose, por la mera fuerza de la costumbre, en la antigua reivindicación de su parentesco con la madre de Magdalen. «Debo considerarlo en todos sus aspectos.» Se metió el paraguas bajo el brazo, cruzó las manos a la espalda y se sumió suavemente en el abismo de sus reflexiones. El orden y la corrección que se observaban en las raídas ropas del capitán tipificaban con precisión el orden y la corrección que distinguían sus pensamientos. Tenía el hábito de decidir qué camino tomar mediante una pulcra sucesión de alternativas, y así lo decidió entonces.

Se le ofrecían tres posibilidades en relación con el extraordinario descubrimiento que acababa de hacer. La primera era no hacer nada en absoluto. Inadmisible, dada la relación familiar; igualmente inadmisible desde el punto de vista monetario; por tanto, rechazada. La segunda consistía en ganarse la gratitud de los allegados de la joven, valorada en cincuenta libras. La tercera era una oportuna advertencia para ganarse la gratitud de la joven misma, valorada en… una suma desconocida. El cauteloso Wragge vaciló entre estas dos últimas alternativas; no porque dudara de los recursos pecuniarios de Magdalen, pues nada sabía de las circunstancias que habían privado de su herencia a las hermanas, sino por la duda de si existiría un obstáculo, en forma de caballero desconocido que estuviera relacionado personalmente con la desaparición de Magdalen. Tras maduras reflexiones, decidió hacer un alto y dejarse guiar por las circunstancias. Mientras tanto, lo más importante era adelantarse al mensajero de Londres y echarle el guante a la joven.

- Siento pena por esa joven descarriada -dijo el capitán pensativamente, paseándose con solemnidad de un lado a otro por la orilla solitaria-. Siempre la he considerado, y siempre la consideraré, como una sobrina.

¿Dónde se hallaba la pariente adoptada en aquel momento? En otras palabras, ¿de qué modo era más probable que una señorita en la crítica situación de Magdalen pasara las horas que debía esperar hasta el regreso del señor Huxtable? Si en el fondo de aquel asunto se alzaba el obstáculo de un caballero, sería una mera pérdida de tiempo seguir adelante. Pero si lo que se deducía del cartel era cierto, si realmente estaba sola en la ciudad de York en aquel momento, ¿dónde tenía más probabilidades de estar?

Para empezar, no sería en las atestadas calles, ni contemplando los objetos de interés de la catedral, pues a aquella hora ya no se podía visitar. ¿Estaba en la sala de espera de la estación de trenes? Difícilmente correría ese riesgo. ¿En uno de los hoteles? Dudoso, considerando que estaba completamente sola. ¿En una pastelería? Mucho más probable. ¿Recorriendo la ciudad en un coche de alquiler? Posible, desde luego, pero nada más. ¿Pasando el tiempo ociosamente en algún lugar tranquilo al aire libre?

Muy probable también en una apacible tarde de otoño como aquélla. El capitán se detuvo para sopesar los pros y los contras del lugar tranquilo y la pastelería y se decidió por el primero. Tenía tiempo más que suficiente de siete a ocho para localizarla en la pastelería, para preguntar por ella en los principales hoteles o, finalmente, para interceptarla en los alrededores de la residencia del señor Huxtable. Mientras hubiera luz del día lo más sensato era aprovecharla para buscar a Magdalen al aire libre. ¿Dónde? El paseo era un lugar tranquilo, pero no estaba allí, ni en el solitario camino de más allá que volvía junto al muro de la abadía. ¿Dónde buscarla, pues? El capitán se detuvo, miró al otro lado del río, se animó con una nueva idea y corrió de repente de nuevo al transbordador.

«El paseo de la muralla -pensó aquel hombre juicioso con un guiño de sus ojos bicolores-. El lugar más tranquilo de York y el que visitan todos los forasteros.»

Diez minutos después, el capitán Wragge se hallaba explorando un nuevo terreno. Subió hasta las murallas (que circundaban toda la sección oeste de la ciudad) por la poterna de North Street, desde donde el paseo da media vuelta hasta acabar de nuevo en su extremo sur, en la callejuela de Rosemary Lane. Eran entonces las siete menos veinte. Hacía más de media hora que se había puesto el sol; la luz roja se esparcía ampliamente en el despejado horizonte, al oeste; todos los objetos visibles empezaban a borrarse bajo el suave crepúsculo, pero aún no había oscurecido. Las primeras farolas iluminadas en la calle bajo la muralla parecían tenues puntos de luz amarilla cuando el capitán echó a andar por uno de los paisajes más asombrosos que nos ofrece Inglaterra.

A su derecha, cuando inició la marcha, se extendían los campos abiertos más allá de la muralla: las fértiles praderas, los árboles que las dividían, los amplios meandros del río en la distancia, las casas dispersas más cercanas, todo ello envuelto en la quietud del atardecer, todo más hermoso en la paz del ocaso. A su izquierda, la majestuosa fachada oeste de la catedral de York se alzaba sobre la ciudad y reflejaba los últimos destellos de luz del cielo en las cúspides de sus elevadas torres. ¿Había tentado esta noble perspectiva a la joven perdida a detenerse y contemplarla? No, por el momento no había rastro de ella. El capitán miró en derredor atentamente y siguió caminando.

Llegó al lugar en que la vía férrea atraviesa la antigua muralla a través de unos arcos. Se detuvo allí -donde la actividad central de la gran empresa ferroviaria late con estentóreo pulso metálico junto con la majestad muerta del pasado, bajo las viejas piedras históricas que hablan de una York fortificada y de asedios de hace dos siglos-, y allí volvió a buscarla en vano. Otras personas contemplaban la desolada actividad que se desarrollaba a sus pies sobre la soledad de los raíles, pero Magdalen no se hallaba entre ellas. El capitán miró con vacilación el cielo cada vez más oscuro y siguió caminando.

Se detuvo donde aún sigue en pie la poterna de Micklegate reforzando la muralla de la ciudad como antaño. Ahí el paseo pavimentado desciende unos cuantos pasos, atraviesa el oscuro cuerpo de guardia de piedra de la antigua puerta, asciende de nuevo y sigue su curso hacia el sur hasta que las murallas llegan al río una vez más. El capitán paró y se asomó con impaciencia a los sombríos rincones del viejo cuerpo de guardia. ¿Aguardaba Magdalen allí a que anocheciera y la oscuridad la ocultara a miradas curiosas? No; un solitario trabajador deambulaba por la cámara de piedra, pero no se movía ninguna otra criatura viviente en aquel lugar. El capitán subió por las escaleras que conducían al exterior y siguió andando.

Avanzó unos cincuenta o sesenta metros a lo largo del paseo pavimentado; los aislados arrabales de York a un lado, una cordelería y unos pequeños huertos en una franja de terreno desocupada al otro. Avanzó con ojos ansiosos y acelerando el paso, pues divisó ante él la figura solitaria de una mujer junto al pretil de la muralla con el rostro vuelto hacia el panorama del oeste. El capitán se acercó con cautela para cerciorarse de que era Magdalen antes de que se volviese y lo viera. La alta figura negra era inconfundible, apoyada en el parapeto con gracia indolente. Allí estaba, con su larga capa negra igual que el vestido, iluminado su pálido y resuelto rostro juvenil por la última y mortecina luz de la tarde. Allí estaba la que no hacía ni tres meses que era la niña mimada de sus padres, el preciado tesoro de la casa, a la que jamás se dejaba sin protección, a la que jamás se había dejado sola. Allí estaba, en el encantador amanecer de su vida de mujer adulta, ¡una náufraga en una ciudad extraña, una náufraga arrojada al mundo!

A pesar de su carácter truhanesco, ante esta primera visión de Magdalen incluso el intrépido aplomo del capitán Wragge se tambaleó. Cuando ella volvió lentamente la cabeza y lo miró, el capitán alzó el sombrero con lo más parecido al respeto que una larga vida de audacia y desfachatez le permitía aún mostrar.

- Creo que tengo el honor de dirigirme a la menor de las señoritas Vanstone -empezó-. Encantadísimo, se lo aseguro, por más de una razón.

Ella lo miró con fría sorpresa. No le vino a la memoria, al presentarse ante ella con otros modales y ropas distintas, recuerdo alguno del día en que él las había seguido a ella y a su hermana cuando volvían de pasear con la señorita Garth.

- Se equivoca -dijo tranquilamente-. Es usted un completo desconocido para mí.

- Perdóneme -dijo el capitán-. Soy una especie de pariente. Tuve el placer de verla a usted en la primavera del presente año. Me presenté en aquella ocasión memorable a una honorable preceptora de la familia de su difunto padre. Permítame presentarme a usted en circunstancias igualmente agradables. Me llamo Wragge.

Para entonces el capitán había recobrado enteramente su insolencia; guiñó los ojos bicolores alegremente y acompañó su modesta presentación con una reverencia de maestro de baile.

Magdalen frunció el entrecejo y retrocedió un paso. El capitán no era hombre que se dejara desanimar por una fría recepción. Se metió el paraguas bajo el brazo y deletreó su nombre jocosamente para ayudarla a recordar.

- W, R, A, dos Ges, E, Wragge -dijo, marcando persuasivamente las letras con los dedos.

- Recuerdo su nombre -dijo Magdalen-. Perdóneme si me despido tan bruscamente, pero tengo un compromiso.

Magdalen intentó irse en dirección al norte, hacia el ferrocarril. El capitán frustró el intento inmediatamente alzando ambas manos, que mostraron un par de guantes negros zurcidos, en señal de amable protesta.

- Por ahí no -dijo-; por ahí no, señorita Vanstone, ¡se lo suplico!

- ¿Por qué no? -preguntó Magdalen con tono altanero.

- Porque -respondió el capitán- es el camino que conduce a la casa del señor Huxtable.

El irreprimible asombro de Magdalen al oír esta respuesta hizo que se inclinara hacia él y lo mirara a la cara de cerca por primera vez. El capitán soportó su receloso escrutinio con toda la apariencia de sentirse extremadamente gratificado.

- H, U, X: Hux -dijo, volviendo alegremente a la vieja broma-; T, A: ta; B, L, E: ble. Huxtable.

- ¿Qué sabe usted del señor Huxtable? -preguntó Magdalen-. ¿Qué pretende nombrándolo?

El sinuoso labio del capitán se torció de nuevo hacia arriba. Respondió inmediatamente del modo más práctico, sacando el cartel del bolsillo.

- Aún queda luz suficiente -dijo- para que unos ojos jóvenes (y encantadores) puedan leer. Antes de dar comienzo a la declaración personal que su halagadora pregunta requiere de mí, le ruego que preste un momento de atención a este documento.

Magdalen cogió el cartel. Con el último resplandor del ocaso leyó las líneas que ponían precio a su rescate, que hacían pública su descripción en implacable letra impresa, como si fuera la descripción de un perro extraviado. No hubo compasiva deferencia que preparara a Magdalen para aquella conmoción, ni palabra amable que la mitigara cuando se produjo. El truhán, cuyos sagaces ojos la contemplaban ávidamente mientras leía, ignoraba como ella que el cartel robado se había impreso tan sólo en previsión de lo peor, y que sólo debía hacerse público en caso de haber agotado todos los medios más discretos. El cartel le cayó de la mano; Magdalen enrojeció hasta la raíz del cabello. Volvió el rostro, como si se hubiera borrado de su cabeza toda idea sobre la existencia del capitán Wragge.

- ¡Oh, Norah, Norah! -exclamó para sí con pesar-, ¡Después de la carta que te escribí; después de la dura lucha que sostuve para marcharme! ¡Oh, Norah, Norah!

- ¿Cómo está Norah? -preguntó el capitán con la mayor de las cortesías.

Magdalen se volvió hacia él con furiosos destellos en sus grandes ojos grises.

- ¿Se ha mostrado esto públicamente? -preguntó, pisoteando el cartel-. ¿Se lee la descripción de la marca del cuello en todo York?

- Le ruego que se tranquilice -dijo el persuasivo Wragge-. Por el momento tengo razones para creer que acaba usted de examinar la única copia en circulación. Permítame que la recoja.

Magdalen cogió el papel del suelo antes de que el capitán pudiera tocarlo, lo rompió en pedazos y los arrojó por encima de la muralla.

- ¡Bravo! -exclamó el capitán-. Me recuerda usted a su pobre y querida madre. El espíritu familiar, señorita Vanstone. Todos heredamos el temperamento ardiente de mi abuelo materno.

- ¿Cómo lo ha obtenido usted? -preguntó Magdalen de repente.

- Mi querida niña, se lo acabo de decir -le amonestó el capitán-. Lo heredamos todos de mi abuelo materno.

- ¿Cómo ha obtenido ese cartel? -repitió ella con vehemencia.

- ¡Le pido mil perdones! Mi cabeza se había volcado en el espíritu familiar. ¿Cómo lo he obtenido? En breves palabras, así. -El capitán Wragge inició aquí su declaración personal, realizando su acostumbrado ejercicio vocal mediante las palabras más largas del idioma inglés y con el mayor deleite declamatorio. Dado que en aquella rara ocasión nada ganaba ocultándola, se apartó de sus costumbres y, con el mayor de los asombros por la novedad de su situación, se permitió contarle la verdad sin paliativos.

El efecto de su relato sobre Magdalen no cumplió en modo alguno las expectativas del capitán Wragge. Magdalen no se sobresaltó, no se irritó, no mostró inclinación alguna a ponerse a su merced y pedirle consejo. Lo miró a los ojos con firmeza y todo lo que dijo cuando concluyó redondeando pulcramente su última frase fue:

- Siga.

- ¿Que siga? -repitió el capitán-. Le aseguro que me escandaliza haberla decepcionado, pero lo cierto es que he terminado.

- No, no ha terminado -replicó Magdalen-. Se ha dejado el final de la historia. El final es éste: ha venido aquí a buscarme y pretende conseguir las cincuenta libras de recompensa.

Estas claras palabras dejaron al capitán tan estupefacto que por un momento enmudeció. Pero se había enfrentado demasiado a menudo con verdades embarazosas de toda suerte como para que su desconcierto fuera permanente. Antes de que Magdalen pudiera aprovecharse de su ventaja, el truhán había recobrado el aplomo: Wragge volvía por sus fueros.

- Muy lista -dijo el capitán entre risas indulgentes y golpeando el pavimento con la punta del paraguas-. Algunos hombres podrían tomárselo en serio, pero yo no me ofendo tan fácilmente. Pruebe otra vez.

Magdalen lo miró en la oscuridad creciente con muda perplejidad. Su escasa experiencia social se había desarrollado entre personas que tenían el común sentido del honor y la responsabilidad de una posición social. Hasta entonces no había visto de la gran fábrica de la civilización más que el producto humano que había tenido un buen resultado. Delante tenía uno de los fracasos y, pese a su agudeza, no sabía cómo tratarlo.

- Perdóneme por volver al tema -prosiguió el capitán-. Se me acaba de ocurrir que quizá haya usted hablado en serio. ¡Mi pobre niña! ¿Cómo puedo llevarme las cincuenta libras antes de que me ofrezcan la recompensa? Puede que esos carteles no se fijen en las paredes hasta dentro de una semana. Por valiosa que sea para sus parientes (incluyéndome a mí), créame, los abogados que se ocupan del caso no pagarán cincuenta libras por usted si hallan el modo de evitarlo. ¿Sigue convencida de que mis necesitados bolsillos esperan abiertos el dinero? Muy bien. Olvídese de mí y ciérrelos con sus propios y bellos dedos. Hay un tren para Londres a las nueve cuarenta y cinco de la noche. Sométase a los deseos de sus amigos y vuelva en él.

- ¡Jamás! -dijo Magdalen, enardeciéndose ante la mera insinuación, exactamente como pretendía el capitán-. Si antes hubiera estado indecisa, ese vil cartel me hubiera decidido. A Norah la perdono -añadió, volviendo el rostro y bajando la voz-, pero al señor Pendril y a la señorita Garth no.

- ¡Muy acertado! -observó el capitán Wragge-. Es el espíritu familiar. Yo hubiera hecho lo mismo a su edad. Se lleva en la sangre. ¡Escuche! Ahí está el reloj otra vez; las siete y media. ¡Señorita Vanstone, perdone mi oportuna brusquedad! Si quiere llevar a cabo su propósito, si quiere seguir siendo dueña de sus actos durante mucho tiempo, debe emprender alguna acción antes de las ocho. Es usted joven, carece de experiencia, corre un peligro inminente. Vemos aquí una emergencia por un lado, y aquí estoy yo, por el otro, con todo el interés de un tío y repleto de consejos. Utilíceme.

- Supongamos que elijo no depender de nadie y actuar por mi cuenta. ¿Qué pasaría? -preguntó Magdalen.

- Que -respondió el capitán- se encaminaría directamente a una de las cuatro trampas que se han tendido para atraparla en la antigua e interesante ciudad de York. Primera trampa, en la casa del señor Huxtable; segunda trampa, en todos los hoteles; tercera trampa, en la estación de ferrocarril; cuarta trampa, en el teatro. El hombre de los carteles ha tenido una hora a su disposición. Si no ha tendido esas cuatro trampas (con la ayuda del procurador local) en ese tiempo, no es el eficiente pasante de abogado por el que lo tomo. ¡Vamos, vamos, mi querida niña! Si hay alguna otra persona cuyos consejos prefiera a los míos...

- Usted mismo puede ver que estoy sola -le interrumpió ella orgullosamente-. Si me conociera mejor, sabría que no dependo de nada más qué de mí misma.

Estas palabras disiparon la única duda que subsistía en la mente del capitán, la duda de si tenía el camino despejado ante él. Resultaba evidente que el motivo de la huida de Magdalen coincidía con el que suponían los carteles: el temerario capricho de convertirse en actriz. «Una de dos -pensó Wragge con toda lógica-. O vale más de cincuenta libras para mí en su situación actual, o no las vale. Si las vale, sus amigos ya pueden esperar sentados. Si no, sólo tengo que retenerla hasta que se fijen los carteles.» Fortalecido por este simple plan de acción, el capitán volvió a la carga y colocó cortésmente a Magdalen en la disyuntiva de elegir entre las dos alternativas inevitables de confiarse a él, por un lado, o de regresar con sus allegados, por el otro.

- Respeto una personalidad independiente cuando la veo -dijo con aire de severidad virtuosa-. En una pariente joven y encantadora, no sólo la respeto, la admiro. Pero (perdóneme la franqueza) para vivir por su cuenta primero tendrá que hallar los medios. En las presentes circunstancias, ¿cuáles son esos medios? Para empezar, el señor Huxtable está descartado.

- Descartado por esta noche -dijo Magdalen-, pero ¿qué me impide escribirle y citarme con él en privado para mañana?

- Se lo concedo de todo corazón, ha dado en el blanco sin duda. Ahora me toca a mí. Para llegar a mañana (perdóneme de nuevo por la osadía), primero tendrá que pasar esta noche. ¿Dónde va a dormir?

- ¿No hay hoteles en York?

- Excelentes hoteles para familias numerosas; excelentes hoteles para caballeros solteros. Los peores hoteles del mundo para jóvenes y hermosas señoritas que se presentan solas en la puerta sin acompañante masculino, sin doncella y sin equipaje. Aun siendo de noche, creo que vería el baúl de una señora si hubiera algo parecido en las cercanías.

- Mi baúl está en la consigna. ¿Qué me impide enviar a alguien a buscarlo con el resguardo?

- Nada, si lo que quiere es comunicar su dirección por medio de su baúl, nada más. ¡Piense, se lo ruego, piense! ¿Cree realmente que la gente que la está buscando es tan estúpida como para no vigilar la consigna? ¿Cree que serán tan estúpidos, cuando vean que no se presenta usted hoy a las ocho en casa del señor Huxtable, como para no indagar en todos los hoteles? ¿Cree que una joven de su atractivo podría alojarse en una posada (aun cuando accedieran a ello) sin convertirse en objeto de la curiosidad general y de todos los comentarios? La noche se acerca todo lo deprisa que puede. No quiero aburrirla, permítame tan sólo preguntarle una vez más, ¿dónde va a dormir?

No había respuesta a esa pregunta; en su posición, Magdalen no tenía absolutamente ninguna respuesta. Guardó silencio.

- ¿Dónde va a dormir? -repitió el capitán-. La respuesta es obvia: bajo mi techo. La señora Wragge estará encantada de conocerla. Considérela como una tía; le ruego que la considere su tía. La patrona es viuda, la casa está cerca de aquí, no hay más huéspedes, y hay una habitación libre. ¿Qué podría haber más satisfactorio en las actuales circunstancias? Fíjese, se lo ruego, en que nada digo sobre mañana, el mañana se lo dejo a usted, yo me limito exclusivamente a la noche. Podría, o no, disponer de facilidades en el mundo del teatro, y estar en disposición de ofrecérselas. Podría, o no, sentir una fuerte simpatía y admiración al considerar su carácter impulsivo e independiente. Podrían, o no, acudir en tropel a mi memoria montones de ejemplos de rutilantes estrellas de la escena británica que empezaron su aprendizaje en las tablas como ahora usted. Éstos son temas para el futuro. Por el momento, me limitaré a mi estricto deber. Estamos a cinco minutos andando de mi dirección actual. Permítame ofrecerle mi brazo. ¿No? ¿Vacila? ¿Desconfía de mí? ¡Cielos!, ¿será posible que haya oído alguna cosa contra mí?

- Es muy posible -dijo Magdalen sin el menor titubeo.

- ¿Me permite inquirir acerca de los detalles? -preguntó el capitán con el más cortés aplomo-. No tema ofenderme; le agradeceré que me lo cuente. Hablando claro, ¿qué ha oído?

Magdalen le respondió con la desesperada despreocupación que siente una mujer por las consecuencias cuando está acorralada; respondió al instante:

- He oído que es usted un granuja.

- ¿En serio? -dijo el impenetrable Wragge-. ¿Un granuja? ¡Bien! Renuncio a mi privilegio de desengañarla hasta mejor ocasión. Para seguir con la conversación, supongamos que soy un granuja. ¿Qué es el señor Huxtable?

- Un hombre respetable, de lo contrario no le hubiera encontrado en la casa donde lo conocí.

- Muy bien. ¡Ahora observe! Antes ha hablado de escribir al señor Huxtable. ¿Qué cree más probable que haga un hombre respetable con una joven señorita que reconoce abiertamente haber huido de casa y de sus allegados para hacerse actriz? Mi querida niña, tal como usted misma lo presenta, no es un hombre respetable lo que necesita en su difícil situación, sino un granuja... como yo.

Magdalen soltó una amarga carcajada.

- Algo de cierto hay en ello -dijo-. Gracias por recordarme a mí misma y mis

circunstancias. Tengo un objetivo que cumplir, ¿y quién soy yo para elegir el modo de lograrlo? Ahora me toca a mí pedir perdón. Hablaba como si fuera una señorita de buena familia y posición. ¡Absurdo! Nosotros sabemos la verdad, ¿no es así, capitán Wragge? Tiene usted toda la razón. La hija de nadie tiene que dormir bajo el techo de alguien, ¿por qué no el suyo?

- Por aquí -indicó el capitán, aprovechando hábilmente el súbito cambio de humor de Magdalen y absteniéndose sagazmente de exasperarla con más palabrería-. Por aquí.

Magdalen le siguió unos cuantos pasos y se detuvo.

- Supongamos que me descubren -espetó bruscamente-. ¿Quién tiene autoridad sobre mí? ¿Quién puede obligarme a volver si yo decido lo contrario? ¿Qué más da que me encuentren todos mañana? ¿No puedo acaso decirle no al señor Pendril? ¿No puedo confiar en mi valor frente a la señorita Garth?

- ¿Puede confiar en su valor frente a su hermana? -susurró el capitán, que no había olvidado las referencias a Norah que habían escapado en dos ocasiones de los labios de Magdalen.

Magdalen dejó caer la cabeza. Se estremeció como si el frío aire de la noche la hubiera golpeado y se apoyó contra el parapeto de la muralla con aire cansado.

- Frente a Norah, no -dijo con tristeza-. Podría confiar en mí misma frente a los demás, pero no frente a Norah.

- Por aquí -repitió el capitán Wragge. Magdalen recobró la compostura; miró el cielo oscurecido y la vista que se oscurecía alrededor.

- Lo que haya de ser, será -dijo, y siguió al capitán.

El reloj de la catedral daba las ocho menos cuarto cuando abandonaron el paseo de la muralla y bajaron las escaleras hasta Rosemary Lane. Casi en ese mismo momento, el pasante del abogado de Londres daba las últimas instrucciones a sus subordinados y ocupaba su lugar en la orilla opuesta del río, desde donde podía ver fácilmente la puerta del señor Huxtable.

CAPÍTULO II

El capitán Wragge se detuvo casi en el centro de la corta hilera de casas de Rosemary Lane y abrió la puerta con su propia llave para acceder a su alojamiento. Cuando entraron en el pasillo, apareció una mujer con aire abrumado y cofia de viuda portando una bujía.

- Mi sobrina -dijo el capitán, presentando a Magdalen-. Mi sobrina está de visita en York. Ha tenido la amabilidad de acceder a ocupar el dormitorio que tiene usted vacío. Hágame el favor de considerarlo alquilado a mi sobrina y ponga especial cuidado en airear las sábanas. ¿Está arriba la señora Wragge? Muy bien. Présteme su bujía. Mi querida niña, el gabinete de la señora Wragge está en el primer piso; la señora Wragge está visible. Permítame mostrarle el camino.

Cuando el capitán empezó a subir las escaleras, la viuda con aire abrumado susurró lastimeramente a Magdalen:

- Espero que usted me pague, señorita. Su tío no lo hace.

El capitán abrió la puerta de la primera habitación del primer piso y descubrió a una figura femenina ataviada con un vestido de deslustrado raso color ámbar. Estaba sentada, solitaria, en una pequeña silla con unos guantes viejos y sucios en las manos, un viejo libro destartalado sobre las rodillas y una pequeña vela al lado. La figura terminaba en su extremo superior en una cara ancha, suave, blanca y redonda -como una luna- rodeada por una cofia y cintas verdes, y tenuemente iluminada por unos ojos de apagado color azul, que miraban directamente al vacío y no hicieron el menor caso de la aparición de Magdalen en el umbral de la puerta.

- ¡Señora Wragge! -gritó el capitán, como si estuviera profundamente dormida-. ¡Señora Wragge!

La señora de los apagados ojos azules se levantó lentamente hasta alcanzar una altura en apariencia interminable. Cuando por fin alcanzó a erguirse por completo, su estatura sobrepasaba siete u ocho centímetros el metro ochenta. Por sabio designio de la Providencia, los gigantes de uno y otro sexo nacen por lo general con un carácter afable. Si se hubiera colocado a la señora Wragge al lado de un cordero, la comparación, en esas circunstancias, habría descubierto en el cordero un auténtico impostor.

- ¿Té, capitán? -preguntó la señora Wragge, mirando sumisamente a su marido, cuya cabeza apenas le llegaba hasta el hombro aun poniéndose de puntillas.

- La menor de las señoritas Vanstone -dijo el capitán, presentando a Magdalen-. Nuestra hermosa pariente, a la que he encontrado por una feliz casualidad. Nuestra invitada por esta noche. ¡Nuestra invitada! -insistió el capitán, gritando de nuevo como si la señora alta estuviera profundamente dormida, pese a que los propios ojos de Magdalen atestiguaban lo contrario.

Una sonrisa se manifestó (mediante un débil esbozo) en el amplio espacio vacío de la faz de la señora Wragge.

- ¿Oh? -dijo con tono interrogativo-. ¿Oh, en serio? Por favor, señorita, ¿no quiere sentarse? Lo siento… no, no quería decir que lo siento; es decir, estoy muy contenta… - Se interrumpió y consultó a su marido con una mirada de impotencia.

- ¡Contenta, por supuesto! -gritó el capitán.

- Contenta, por supuesto -repitió la giganta del raso ámbar con mayor docilidad que nunca.

- La señora Wragge no es sorda -explicó el capitán-. Sólo es un poco lenta. Físicamente apática, si se me permite la expresión. Me limito a gritarle (y le ruego que me haga usted el honor de gritarle también) como un estímulo necesario para sus ideas. Grítele, y su mente acabará respondiendo. Háblele, y se alejará a la deriva directamente. ¡Señora Wragge!

- ¿Té, capitán? -preguntó la señora Wragge por segunda vez, reconociendo al instante el estímulo.

- ¡Enderécese la cofia! -gritó su marido-. Le pido mil perdones -prosiguió, dirigiéndose de nuevo a Magdalen-. La triste realidad es que soy un mártir de mi propio sentido del orden. El desorden, la falta de sistema y regularidad me producen una grandísima irritación. Me distraigo, pierdo la compostura; no descanso hasta que todo vuelve a estar en su sitio. En el aspecto externo, la señora Wragge es, para mi infinito pesar, la mujer más desaliñada con la que me he tropezado. ¡Más a la derecha! -gritó el capitán cuando la señora Wragge, como una niña bien enseñada, mostró la cofia a la inspección de su marido.

Inmediatamente la señora Wragge tiró de la cofia hacia la izquierda. Magdalen se levantó y se la enderezó. El rostro de luna llena de la giganta se iluminó por vez primera. Miró la capa y el sombrero de Magdalen con admiración.

- ¿Le gustan los vestidos, señorita? -preguntó de repente en un susurro confidencial-. A mí, sí.

- Enséñele a la señorita Vanstone su habitación -dijo el capitán, como si la casa entera le perteneciera-. La habitación libre, la habitación libre de la patrona, en la parte de delante del tercer piso. Ofrézcale a la señorita Vanstone cuantos artículos relacionados con el aseo pueda necesitar. No lleva equipaje. Subsane la deficiencia y luego vuelva y prepare el té.

La señora Wragge acusó recibo de estas altaneras instrucciones con una mirada de plácido desconcierto y salió de la habitación; Magdalen la siguió con una bujía que le había entregado el solícito capitán. Tan pronto como estuvieron solas en el descansillo, la señora Wragge alzó el libro viejo y destartalado que leía cuando Magdalen le fue presentada y que no había soltado en ningún momento, y lentamente se dio unos golpecitos en la frente con él.

- ¡Oh, mi pobre cabeza! -dijo la alta señora en un débil soliloquio-. ¡Me zumba más que nunca!

- ¿Le zumba? -repitió Magdalen, atónita.

La señora Wragge subió por las escaleras sin dar explicaciones, se detuvo frente a la puerta de una de las habitaciones del segundo piso y entró.

- Este no es el tercer piso -dijo Magdalen-. Ésta no puede ser mi habitación.

- Espere un poco -imploró la señora Wragge-. Espere un poco, señorita, antes de que subamos. El zumbido que tengo en la cabeza es peor que nunca. Por favor, espere a que esté un poco mejor.

- ¿Quiere que pida ayuda? -preguntó Magdalen-. ¿Llamo a la patrona?

- ¿Ayuda? -dijo la señora Wragge-. ¡Cielos, no quiero ayuda! Estoy acostumbrada. Tengo un zumbido en la cabeza que va y viene desde hace... ¿cuántos años? -Se interrumpió para reflexionar, se perdió, y de repente probó con una pregunta a la desesperada-. ¿Ha estado alguna vez en los salones del restaurante Darch de Londres? -inquirió, aparentando el mayor interés.

- No -respondió Magdalen, perpleja por la extraña pregunta.

- Allí fue donde me empezó el zumbido de la cabeza -dijo la señora Wragge, siguiendo

una nueva pista con gran atención y vehemencia-. Estaba empleada en el restaurante Darch para servir a los caballeros, eso es. Los caballeros llegaban todos a la vez; los caballeros tenían hambre todos a la vez; los caballeros pedían todos a la vez... -Se interrumpió y volvió a usar el viejo y gastado libro para golpearse con desánimo la cabeza.

- ¿Y usted tenía que recordar todos sus pedidos por separado? -sugirió Magdalen para ayudarla-. ¿Y el esfuerzo de intentarlo la confundió?

- ¡Exacto! -dijo la señora Wragge, excitándose violentamente en un momento-. Cerdo hervido con verduras y pudín de guisantes para el número uno. Guiso de buey con zanahorias y tarta de grosellas para el número dos. Tajada de cordero, que sea rápido, muy hecho y con mucha grasa para el número tres. Bacalao con chirivías, dos chuletas para continuar, vuelta y vuelta, o se acordará de mí, para el número cuatro. Cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez. Zanahorias y tarta de grosellas; pudín de guisantes y mucha grasa; cerdo y buey y cordero, y tajadas de todo y que sea rápido; cerveza negra para uno y rubia para otro; y pan rancio aquí y pan fresco allá; y a este caballero le gusta el queso y a aquél no. Matilda, Tilda, Tilda, Tilda, cincuenta veces hasta que ya no sabía ni cómo me llamaba. ¡Oh, Señor! ¡Oh, Señor! Todos juntos, todos al mismo tiempo, todos malhumorados, todos zumbando en mi cabeza como cuarenta mil millones de abejas. ¡No se lo diga al capitán! ¡No se lo diga al capitán! -La desgraciada criatura dejó caer el viejo y gastado libro y se golpeó la cabeza con ambas manos, clavando una mirada de ciego terror en la puerta.

- ¡Calle! ¡Calle! -dijo Magdalen-. El capitán no la ha oído. Ahora ya sé qué le pasa en la cabeza. Déjeme que la refresque.

Magdalen empapó una toalla en agua y la apretó contra la cabeza ardiente y desvalida que la señora Wragge le ofreció con la docilidad de una niña enferma.

- Qué mano tiene usted -dijo la pobre criatura al notar el alivio del frescor, cogiendo con admiración una mano de Magdalen-. ¡Qué suave y blanca! Yo procuro ser una señora; siempre llevo los guantes puestos, pero no consigo tener unas manos como las suyas. De todas formas voy bien vestida, ¿no es cierto? Me gustan los vestidos; son un consuelo para mí. Siempre soy feliz cuando contemplo mis cosas. Oiga, no se enfadará conmigo, ¿verdad? Me gustaría tanto probarme su sombrero.

Magdalen la complació con la compasión siempre dispuesta de la juventud. La señora Wragge se contempló en el espejo sonriendo y asintiendo para sí con el sombrero sobre la cabeza.

- Yo tuve uno tan bonito como éste en otro tiempo -dijo-, pero era blanco en lugar de negro. Lo llevaba cuando el capitán se casó conmigo.

- ¿Dónde se conocieron? -preguntó Magdalen, formulando la pregunta como un posible medio de aumentar su escasa información sobre el capitán Wragge.

- En el restaurante -dijo la señora Wragge-. Era el más hambriento y el más ruidoso de todos a los que servía. Cometí más errores con él que con todos los demás juntos. Él soltaba juramentos. ¡Oh, vaya si los soltaba! Cuando dejó de gritarme, se casó conmigo. Había otros además de él que también me pretendían. Vaya, tuve donde escoger. ¿Por qué no? Cuando a una le dejan un poquito de dinero que no esperaba, si eso no te convierte en una señora, no sé qué pueda hacerlo. ¿No puede elegir a su gusto una señora? Yo recibí mi poquito dinero y tenía donde elegir, y elegí al capitán, eso es. Era el más elegante y el más bajo de todos ellos. Él se ocupó de mí y de mi dinero. Yo estoy aquí, el dinero se esfumó. No ponga esa toalla encima de la mesa, ¡a él no le gustaría! No mueva sus navajas de afeitar; no lo haga, por favor, o me olvidaré de cuál es cuál. Tengo que recordar cuál es cuál mañana por la mañana. ¡Vaya, el capitán no se afeita solo! Hizo que me enseñaran. Yo le afeito. Yo le peino y le corto las uñas; es terriblemente exigente con sus uñas. También con sus pantalones. Y con sus zapatos. Y con su periódico de la mañana. Y con sus desayunos y comidas y cenas y tés... -Se interrumpió sacudida por un súbito recuerdo, miró alrededor, observó el viejo y gastado

libro en el suelo y juntó las manos con desesperación-. ¡He perdido la página! -exclamó con angustia-. ¡Oh, piedad, qué será de mí! He perdido la página.

- No se preocupe -dijo Magdalen-. Yo se la encontraré en seguida.

Recogió el libro, hojeó las páginas y descubrió que el objeto de la inquietud de la señora Wragge no era más que un viejo y anticuado Tratado del Arte de Cocinar reducido a los habituales epígrafes de Pescado, Carne y Aves, que contenía la acostumbrada serie de recetas. Pasando las hojas, Magdalen llegó a una página en particular cubierta de pequeñas gotas de humedad medio secas.

- ¡Qué curioso! -dijo-. Si no fuera un libro de cocina, diría que alguien ha estado llorando sobre él.

- ¿Alguien? -repitió la señora Wragge con una mirada de asombro-. No es alguien, soy yo. Le doy las gracias, sin duda ésta es la página. Cielos, suelo llorar sobre el libro. Usted también lloraría si tuviera que sacar de ahí las comidas del capitán. Tan seguro como que cada vez que me siento con este libro me empieza otra vez el zumbido en la cabeza. ¿Quién lo entiende? Algunas veces me parece que lo tengo y se me escapa todo. A veces creo que no lo entiendo y lo recuerdo todo de golpe. ¡Fíjese! Esto es lo que ha pedido para desayunar mañana: «Tortilla a las hierbas. Bata dos huevos con un poco de agua o leche, sal, pimienta, cebolletas y perejil. Picar fino». ¡Vaya! ¡Picar fino! ¿Cómo voy a picarlo fino si está todo mezclado y batido? «Ponga un trozo de mantequilla del tamaño de su pulgar en la sartén.» ¡Míreme el pulgar y mírese el suyo! ¿A qué tamaño se refiere? «Derretir, pero no dorar.» Si no se ha de dorar, ¿qué color ha de tener? Él no me lo dice; espera que lo sepa, y yo no lo sé. «Echar la tortilla.» ¡Vaya! Eso puedo hacerlo. «Deje que cuaje, levante todo el borde de la tortilla; cuando esté hecha, déle la vuelta para doblarla sobre sí.» ¡Oh, la de veces que le he dado la vuelta y la he doblado en mi cabeza antes de que entrara usted! «No deje que se endurezca; ponga el plato sobre la sartén y déle la vuelta.» ¿A qué le he de dar la vuelta? Oh, piedad, pruebe con la toalla fría otra vez y dígame a qué, ¿al plato o a la sartén?

- Ponga el plato sobre la sartén -dijo Magdalen-, y luego déle la vuelta a la sartén. Creo que se refiere a eso.

- Se lo agradezco de veras -dijo la señora Wragge-. Quiero grabármelo en la cabeza; repítalo, por favor.

Magdalen lo dijo una vez más.

- Y luego dé la vuelta a la sartén -repitió la señora Wragge con un súbito estallido de energía-. ¡Ahora ya lo entiendo! Oh, todas esas tortillas friéndose en mi cabeza y todas mal. Se lo agradezco mucho, se lo aseguro. Usted me ha puesto buena otra vez; sólo estoy un poco cansada de hablar. Y luego déle la vuelta a la sartén, y luego déle la vuelta a la sartén, y luego déle la vuelta a la sartén. Suena como a poesía, ¿verdad?

Su voz se extinguió y ella cerró los ojos, adormeciéndose. En ese mismo momento se abrió la puerta de la habitación de abajo y las bajas notas de la meliflua voz del capitán flotaron hasta arriba llenas del acostumbrado estimulante para las facultades de su mujer.

- ¡Señora Wragge! -llamó el capitán-. ¡Señora Wragge!

La señora Wragge se puso en pie sobresaltada por aquella terrible llamada.

- Oh, ¿qué me había dicho que hiciera? -preguntó distraídamente-. ¡Montones de cosas y las he olvidado todas!

- Dígale que las ha hecho cuando le pregunte -sugirió Magdalen-. Eran cosas para mí, cosas que no quiero. Recuerdo todo lo necesario. Mi habitación es la de delante en el tercer piso. Baje y dígale que iré en seguida. -Cogió la bujía y empujó a la señora Wragge al descansillo-. Dígale que iré en seguida -susurró de nuevo y subió sola al tercer piso.

La habitación era pequeña y estaba muy pobremente amueblada. En otros tiempos, la señorita Garth hubiera vacilado en ofrecer una habitación semejante en Combe-Raven a uno de los criados. Pero era tranquila, le permitió estar unos minutos a solas, y era soportable, incluso grata, por ese motivo. Se encerró en ella y se acercó mecánicamente, siguiendo el primer impulso de una mujer en un dormitorio extraño, a la pequeña mesa desvencijada y al pequeño y sucio espejo. Aguardó allí unos instantes y luego se apartó con cansado desprecio. «¿Qué importa lo pálida que esté? -pensó-. Frank no puede verme. ¡Qué importa ahora!»

Dejó a un lado capa y sombrero y se sentó para serenarse, pero los acontecimientos del día la habían dejado exhausta. El pasado, cuando intentó recordarlo, hizo sólo que le doliera el corazón. El futuro, cuando intentó imaginarlo, estaba sumido en la negrura. Volvió a levantarse y se situó junto a la ventana sin cortinas; miró al exterior como si la noche desolada guardara cierta simpatía oculta hacia su propia desolación.

«¡Norah! -dijo para sí cariñosamente-. Me pregunto si Norah estará pensando en mí. ¡Oh, ojalá fuera tan paciente como ella! ¡Ojalá pudiera olvidar la deuda que tenemos con Michael Vanstone!»

Una vengativa desesperación ensombreció su rostro; paseó sin hacer ruido por la pequeña jaula que era la habitación.

«¡No, jamás hasta que esa deuda esté pagada!» Sus pensamientos se desviaron de nuevo hacia Frank. «Aún en el mar, pobrecito, cada vez más lejos de mí, navegando de día y de noche. ¡Oh, Frank, ámame!»

Sus ojos se llenaron de lágrimas. Las enjugó rápidamente, se dirigió a la puerta y rió con desesperada frivolidad cuando volvió a abrirla.

«Cualquier compañía es mejor que mis propios pensamientos -espetó temerariamente saliendo de la habitación-. Me había olvidado de mis parientes recién adquiridos, mi tía medio boba y mi tío el granuja.» Bajó las escaleras hasta el descansillo del primer piso y se detuvo con una momentánea vacilación. «¿Cómo terminará todo esto? -se preguntó-. ¿Hacia dónde me lleva este viaje a ciegas? ¿Quién sabe y a quién le importa?»

Entró en la habitación.

El capitán Wragge presidía junto al servicio de té con el aire de un príncipe en su salón de banquetes. A un lado de la mesa se sentaba la señora Wragge vigilando la mirada de su marido como un animal aguardando su alimento. Al otro lado había una silla vacía que el capitán señaló con mano persuasiva cuando entró Magdalen.

- ¿Qué le parece nuestra habitación? -preguntó-. Confío en que la señora Wragge le haya sido de utilidad. ¿Toma usted leche y azúcar? Pruebe el pan de aquí, haga los honores a la mantequilla de York, saboree la frescura de un huevo recién puesto en la vecindad. Le ofrezco lo poco que tengo. La comida de un mendigo, mi querida niña, sazonada con la bienvenida de un caballero.

- Sazonada con sal, pimienta, cebolletas y perejil -murmuró la señora Wragge, buscando instantáneamente una palabra relacionada con la cocina y uniendo su pensamiento a la tortilla durante el resto de la velada.

- ¡Siéntese erguida en la mesa! -gritó el capitán-. Más a la izquierda, más aún; así está bien. Durante su ausencia -continuó, dirigiéndose a Magdalen-, mi cerebro no ha permanecido inactivo. He estado reflexionando sobre su situación, pensando exclusivamente en su provecho. Si mañana decide dejarse guiar por la luz de mi experiencia, esa luz está a su servicio sin reservas. Sería natural que dijera: «Sé muy poco de usted, capitán, y ese poco no es favorable». Lo admito, con una condición: que me permita familiarizarla con mi persona y mi carácter cuando terminemos el té. El

falso pudor es ajeno a mi naturaleza. Está usted viendo a mi mujer, mi casa, mi pan, mis huevos, y mi mantequilla exactamente como son. Véame a mí también, mi querida niña, mientras se lo toma.

Cuando terminó el té, la señora Wragge se retiró a un rincón de la habitación a una señal de su marido, con el sempiterno libro de cocina aún en la mano.

- Picar fino -susurró confidencialmente al pasar junto a Magdalen-. Es un rompecabezas, ¿a que sí?

- ¡Otra vez en chancletas! -gritó el capitán señalando los pesados pies planos de su mujer-. El pie derecho. Cálcese bien el zapato, señora Wragge, ¡cálcese bien el zapato! Por favor, permítame -añadió, ofreciendo su brazo a Magdalen para conducirla hasta un pequeño y sucio sofá de crin-. Necesita descansar; después del largo viaje, realmente necesita descansar. -Acercó su silla al sofá y contempló a Magdalen con un afable aire investigador, como si fuera su médico y hubiera decidido un diagnóstico.

- ¡Muy agradable!, ¡muy agradable! -dijo el capitán cuando vio a su invitada cómodamente instalada en el sofá-. Me siento como en el seno de la familia. ¿Volvemos a nuestro tema, el de mi personalidad de granuja? ¡No!, ¡no! Ni disculpas ni protestas, se lo ruego. No se ande con rodeos, y cuente con que yo hablaré sin pelos en la lengua. Ahora vayamos a los hechos; se lo ruego, vayamos a los hechos. ¿Quién y qué soy yo? Vuelva a la conversación que tuvimos en las murallas de esta interesante ciudad y empecemos una vez más desde su punto de vista. Soy un granuja y, en calidad de tal (como ya he señalado), también el hombre más útil que podía haber conocido. ¡Ahora observe! Hay muchas variedades de granujas; permítame que le hable de la mía para empezar. Soy un timador.

Su absoluta desfachatez era realmente sobrehumana. Ni un vestigio de rubor alteró la monotonía cetrina de su tez; una sonrisa curvaba sus labios sinuosos con la misma complacencia de siempre; guiñó sus ojos multicolores a Magdalen con la franqueza satisfecha de un hombre inofensivo por naturaleza. ¿Le había oído su mujer? Magdalen miró por encima del hombro del capitán hacia el rincón donde se hallaba sentada. La estudiante de cocina autodidacta estaba absorta en su tema. Había avanzado en su tortilla imaginaria hasta la etapa crítica en que tenía que echarse la mantequilla, ese trozo de mantequilla vagamente medido según el tamaño del pulgar. La señora Wragge estaba ensimismada en la contemplación de uno de sus pulgares y sacudía la cabeza como si no consiguiera satisfacerla.

- No se escandalice -prosiguió el capitán-, no se asombre. Timador no es más que una palabra de tres sílabas. T, I: ti; M, A: ma; D, O, R: dor; timador. Definición: Agricultor moral; un hombre que cultiva el campo de la compasión humana. Yo soy ese agricultor moral, ese hombre que cultiva. La mediocridad de miras estrechas, envidiosa de mi éxito en la profesión, me llama timador. ¿Qué más da? Con esa misma mezquindad se ataca a nombres de otras profesiones, llamando escritorzuelos a grandes escritores, carniceros a grandes generales, etcétera. Depende por completo del punto de vista. Adoptando el suyo, me declaro timador para entendernos. Ahora devuélvame el favor y adopte mi punto de vista. Escuche lo que tengo que decir en mi defensa sobre el ejercicio de mi profesión. ¿Continúo hablando con toda franqueza?

- Sí -dijo Magdalen-, y yo le diré después lo que pienso con toda franqueza.

El capitán se aclaró la garganta, convocó mentalmente su ejército entero de palabras -caballería, infantería, artillería y reservas-, se puso personalmente a la cabeza y se apresuró a entrar en acción con una carga general sobre las trincheras morales de la sociedad.

- Ahora observe -empezó-. Aquí estoy yo, un sujeto necesitado. Muy bien. Sin complicar la cuestión preguntando cómo he llegado a esta situación, me limitaré a inquirir si es o no es el deber de una comunidad cristiana ayudar a los necesitados. Si me dice que no, sencillamente me escandalizaré y eso será todo. Si dice que sí, entonces le ruego conteste a esta pregunta: ¿qué culpa hay en hacer que una comunidad cristiana cumpla

con su deber? Podría usted decir: ¿está obligado un hombre previsor que ha ahorrado dinero a gastárselo en un desconocido imprudente que no ha ahorrado nada? ¡Por supuesto que sí! Y dígame, por favor, ¿en qué se basa? ¡Dios del Cielo!, en que él tiene el dinero, claro está. A lo largo y ancho de este mundo, el hombre que no lo tiene, lo consigue con un pretexto y otro del hombre que sí lo tiene, y en nueve casos de cada diez, el pretexto es fraudulento. ¡Cómo! Sus bolsillos están llenos y los míos vacíos, ¿y se niega a ayudarme? ¡Sucio miserable! ¿Cree que voy a permitir que viole en mi persona el sagrado deber de la caridad? No se lo permitiré, lo digo rotundamente, no se lo permitiré. Éstos son mis principios como agricultor moral. ¿Principios que admiten las triquiñuelas? Desde luego. ¿Qué culpa tengo yo de que el campo de la compasión humana no pueda labrarse de ninguna otra manera? Consulte a mis hermanos agricultores que se limitan a la tierra; ¿acaso obtienen ellos sus cosechas limitándose a pedirlas? ¡No! Tienen que embaucar a la árida Naturaleza exactamente igual que yo embauco a hombres mezquinos. Tienen que arar y sembrar y abonar y avenar y todo lo demás. ¿Por qué han de obstaculizarme en la vasta ocupación de avenar a la humanidad? ¿Por qué he de ser perseguido por excitar habitualmente el más noble sentimiento de nuestra naturaleza? ¡Infamante! No tengo otra palabra para describirlo: ¡infamante! Si no tuviera confianza en el futuro, perdería la fe en la humanidad, pero tengo confianza en el futuro. ¡Sí!, uno de estos días (cuando esté muerto y enterrado), cuando las ideas se expandan y avance el conocimiento, los méritos abstractos de la profesión que ahora se denomina timo serán reconocidos. Cuando ese día llegue, que no me saquen de la tumba para hacerme un funeral público, que no se aprovechen de que no tendré voz que alzar en mi defensa insultándome con una estatua. ¡No!, que me hagan justicia en mi lápida, que me describan con una sola frase magistral a modo de epitafio. Aquí yace Wragge, embalsamado en el reconocimiento tardío de su especie; aró, sembró y cosechó a sus congéneres; una posteridad más culta le felicita por la uniforme excelencia de sus cosechas.

Se interrumpió, no por falta de confianza ni de palabras, sino meramente por falta de aliento.

- Se lo digo sinceramente con una pincelada de humor -continuó con tono agradable-. No le estoy escandalizando, ¿verdad? -Aunque cansada y desanimada (recelosa de los demás, insegura de sí misma), la desmedida desvergüenza de la defensa que el capitán Wragge hacía del timo despertó el sentido del humor de Magdalen y llevó una sonrisa a sus labios.

- ¿Es especialmente abundante la cosecha de Yorkshire en estos momentos? -inquirió, usando sus mismas armas con habilidad femenina

- Diana, ha dado en la diana -dijo el capitán, mostrando jocosamente los faldones de su raída chaqueta de caza a modo de comentario sobre la observación de Magdalen-. Mi querida niña, siempre hay cosecha aquí o en cualquier otra parte, pero un hombre no siempre puede recogerla. Me ha sido negada, lamento decirlo, la ayuda de una colaboración inteligente. No tengo nada en común con los torpes y vulgares colegas de mi profesión, que se condenan a sí mismos ante magistrados municipales y jueces del peor de todos los delitos: la estupidez incurable en el ejercicio de nuestra vocación. Estoy completamente solo, tal como me ve. Tras años de fructífera independencia, empiezan a acosarme los inconvenientes de la celebridad. En mi camino hacia el norte, me detengo en esta interesante ciudad por tercera vez, consulto mis libros en busca de las acostumbradas referencias a experiencias pasadas en este lugar, descubro que bajo el encabezamiento, «Situación personal en York», se hallan las iniciales D.C., que significan, Demasiado Conocido. Reviso el índice y busco los aledaños. Encuentro los mismos comentarios con la misma brevedad. «Leeds. D.C. Scarborough. D.C. Harrowgate. D.C.» Etcétera. ¿Cuál es la consecuencia inevitable? Suspendo mis preparativos, mis recursos se evaporan, y mi bella pariente me encuentra convertido en el paupérrimo caballero que tiene ahora ante sus ojos.

- ¿Sus libros? -dijo Magdalen-. ¿A qué libros se refiere?

- Ya verá -contestó el capitán-. Confíe en mí, o no, como guste. Yo confío en usted por completo. Ya verá.

Después de estas palabras, se retiró a la habitación interior. Durante su ausencia, Magdalen lanzó una mirada furtiva a la señora Wragge. ¿Seguía ajena a la verborrea de su marido? Por completo. Había avanzado en la tortilla imaginaria hasta la última etapa del proceso culinario y ensayaba ahora la operación final de darle la vuelta, con la palma de la mano para representar el plato y el libro de cocina como sartén.

- Lo tengo -dijo la señora Wragge asintiendo, mientras miraba a Magdalen-. Primero se pone la sartén sobre el plato y luego se les da la vuelta a los dos.

El capitán Wragge regresó con un pulcro maletín negro adornado con un reluciente cierre de latón. De él sacó cinco o seis gruesos libritos de tipo mercantil encuadernados en piel de becerro y con papel vitela, cada uno de ellos con su pequeño cierre individual.

- ¡Ojo! -dijo el agricultor moral-. No me atribuyo mérito alguno por esto; soy ordenado por naturaleza y nada más. He de consignarlo todo por escrito, ¡si no, me volvería loco! Aquí está mi biblioteca mercantil: Diario, Libro Mayor, Libro de Estamentos, Libro de Cartas, Libro de Observaciones, etcétera. Tenga la amabilidad de echarle un vistazo a cualquiera de ellos. Me jacto de que no hay nada parecido a un borrón ni a una entrada hecha a la ligera de la primera página a la última. Fíjese en esta habitación; ¿hay alguna silla fuera de lugar? ¡Que yo no me entere! Míreme. ¿Tengo polvo? ¿Estoy sucio? ¿Voy mal afeitado? Soy, en resumen, un pobretón impecable, ¿o no? ¡Ojo! No me atribuyo el mérito; es la naturaleza del hombre, mi querida niña, ¡la naturaleza del hombre!

Abrió uno de los libros. Magdalen no podía juzgar la admirable corrección con que se llevaban las cuentas en él, pero sí podía apreciar la pulcritud de la caligrafía, la regularidad de las hileras de números, la exactitud matemática de las líneas trazadas con tinta roja y negra, la limpia ausencia de borrones, manchas o tachones. Aunque el sentido del orden innato en el capitán Wragge -como en muchos otros- estaba arraigado de forma excesivamente mecánica para ejercer una influencia de elevación moral sobre sus actos, había producido un efecto legítimo sobre sus hábitos y había sometido sus granujadas a un proceder tan estrictamente metódico como si se trataran de las transacciones comerciales de un hombre honrado.

- ¿Le parece que mi sistema es complejo en apariencia? -prosiguió el capitán-. En realidad es la simplicidad misma. Me limito a eludir los errores de colegas inferiores. Es decir, jamás pido para mí mismo y jamás apelo a la gente rica, equivocaciones fatales ambas que los colegas de inferior categoría cometen continuamente. La gente con pocos medios tiene a veces impulsos generosos relacionados con el dinero, la gente rica no los tiene jamás. Milord, con cuarenta mil libras al año, sir John con propiedades en media docena de condados: ésos son los hombres que jamás perdonan al cortés sinvergüenza por timarles un soberano; ésos son los hombres que mandan llamar a los agentes de la mendicidad; ésos son los hombres que cuidan su dinero. ¿Quiénes son las personas que pierden chelines y monedas de seis peniques por puro descuido? Criados y empleaduchos para quienes los chelines y las monedas de seis peniques son importantes. ¿Ha oído alguna vez decir que a Rothschild o a Baring se les cayera una moneda de cuatro peniques por el agujero de una alcantarilla? La moneda de cuatro peniques está más segura en el bolsillo de Rothschild que en el de esa mujer que vocea ahora mismo sus camarones pasados en Skeldergate. Fortalecido por estos sabios principios, enriquecido por la información escrita de mi biblioteca mercantil, he recorrido la población durante años y he recogido mi caritativa cosecha con el más alentador de los éxitos. Aquí, en el libro número uno, se hallan descritos todos mis estamentos, con el sentir público dominante al que apelar en cada uno de ellos: el estamento militar, el estamento sacerdotal, el estamento campesino. Etcétera, etcétera. Aquí, en el número dos, se encuentran los casos por los que abogo: familia de un oficial que cayó en Waterloo; esposa de un pobre coadjutor aquejado de una debilidad nerviosa; viuda de un ganadero en apuros al que mató de una cornada un toro enloquecido. Etcétera, etcétera. Aquí, en el número tres, está la gente que ha oído las historias de la familia del oficial, la esposa del coadjutor, la viuda del ganadero, y la gente que no las ha oído; la gente que ha dicho que sí y la gente que ha dicho que no; la gente con la que se puede volver a intentar, los que necesitan un caso nuevo para animarlos, los que dudan, o la gente con la que hay que tener cuidado. Etcétera,

etcétera. Aquí, en el número cuatro, encontramos mis diferentes tipos de letras, mis cartas de recomendación sobre mi propia valía e integridad, mis desgarradoras declaraciones de la familia del oficial, la esposa del coadjutor y la viuda del ganadero, manchadas de lágrimas, salpicadas de emoción. Etcétera, etcétera. Aquí, en los números cinco y seis, están mis subscripciones personales a obras de beneficencia, pagadas realmente en zonas remunerativas basándome en el principio de gastar uno para ganar ciento, así como el diario de mis actuaciones cotidianas, mis reflexiones y comentarios personales, mi declaración de dificultades existentes (tales como la de hallarme D.C. en esta interesante ciudad), mis entradas y salidas, condiciones atmosféricas, política y eventos públicos, fluctuaciones en mi salud, fluctuaciones de la cabeza de la señora Wragge, fluctuaciones en nuestros medios y comidas, nuestros pagos, perspectivas y principios. Etcétera, etcétera. Así, mi querida niña, gira la rueda del timador. Así pues, me ve tal como soy. Usted sabía que vivía de mi ingenio antes de que la encontrara. ¡Bien! ¿Le he demostrado o no le he demostrado que tengo ingenio del que vivir?

- No me cabe la menor duda de que se ha hecho usted justicia -dijo Magdalen serenamente.

- No estoy cansado en absoluto -continuó el capitán-. Puedo seguir toda la noche si es necesario. Sin embargo, si me he hecho justicia, quizá deba dejar que el resto de rasgos de mi carácter se desvelen por sí mismos en ocasiones futuras. Por el momento me retiro. Wragge hace mutis. ¡Y ahora vayamos al grano! Permítame inquirir qué efecto he producido en su ánimo. ¿Sigue creyendo que el granuja que le ha confiado todos sus secretos estaría dispuesto a aprovecharse vilmente de una hermosa pariente?

- Esperaré un poco -respondió Magdalen- antes de contestar a esa pregunta. Cuando he bajado a tomar el té me ha dicho que había empleado el tiempo en mi provecho. ¿Puedo preguntar cómo?

- Por supuesto -dijo el capitán Wragge-. Tendrá usted el resultado neto de todo el proceso mental. Dicho proceso abarca las acciones presentes y futuras de sus desconsoladas amigas y de los abogados que las ayudan a encontrarla. Con toda probabilidad sus acciones presentes han tomado la siguiente forma: el pasante del abogado ha desesperado de hallarla en casa del señor Huxtable y, a estas horas, después de esmeradas indagaciones en todos los hoteles, también ha desesperado de hallarla en uno de ellos. Su última posibilidad estriba en que envíe usted a alguien a buscar su baúl a la consigna; usted no lo hace y por esta noche el pasante (gracias al capitán Wragge y a Rosemary Lane) ha agotado todos sus recursos. Inmediatamente comunicará este hecho a sus jefes de Londres y ellos (¡no se alarme!) pedirán ayuda a la policía local. Teniendo en cuenta las inevitables demoras, con el ingenio aguzado y con esos carteles para ayudarle a identificarla, llegará un espía profesional, desde luego pasado mañana a más tardar, posiblemente antes. Si usted se queda en York, si intenta ponerse en contacto con el señor Huxtable, ese espía la descubrirá. Si, por otro lado, abandona la ciudad antes de que él llegue (utilizando otro medio de transporte que no sea el ferrocarril, claro está), lo dejará en el mismo brete que al pasante, lo desafiará a hallar una pista fresca sobre usted. Éste es mi breve resumen sobre su situación actual. ¿Qué le parece?

- Creo que tiene un defecto -dijo Magdalen-. No termina.

- Perdóneme -replicó el capitán-. Termina en un arreglo para que parta a salvo y en un plan para que se cumplan sus deseos de convertirse en actriz. Ambos surgidos de la voz de mi propia experiencia y esperando ambos una palabra suya para que se los describa inmediatamente con todo detalle.

- Creo que sé cuál es esa palabra -dijo Magdalen, mirándolo con suma atención.

- Le aseguro que estaré encantado de oírla. Sólo tiene que decir: «Capitán Wragge, hágase cargo de mí», y mis planes serán suyos desde ese mismo momento.

- Me tomaré esta noche para estudiar su propuesta -dijo ella tras unos instantes de

reflexión-. Le daré una respuesta mañana por la mañana.

El capitán Wragge pareció un tanto decepcionado. No esperaba que Magdalen respondiera tan tranquilamente con reservas a las reservas por él mostradas.

- ¿Por qué no decidirlo ahora mismo? -protestó con su tono más persuasivo-. Sólo tiene que considerar...

- Tengo más cosas que considerar de las que usted se imagina -replicó ella-. Tengo otro objetivo en perspectiva, además del que usted ya conoce.

- ¿Puedo preguntarle...?

- Perdóneme, capitán Wragge, no puede. Permítame agradecerle su hospitalidad y desearle las buenas noches. Estoy agotada. Necesito descansar.

Una vez más el capitán tuvo el sentido común de adaptarse al estado de ánimo de Magdalen con el presto dominio de sí mismo de un hombre experimentado.

- ¡Agotada, por supuesto! -dijo, comprensivamente-. Ha sido imperdonable por mi parte no haberlo pensado antes. Reanudaremos nuestra conversación mañana. Permítame ofrecerle una bujía. ¡Señora Wragge!

Postrada por el ejercicio mental, la señora Wragge seguía el proceso de la tortilla en sueños. Tenía la cabeza vuelta hacia un lado y el cuerpo hacia el otro. Roncaba débilmente. Una de sus manos se levantaba sola a intervalos, agitaba una sartén imaginaria y caía con un leve golpe sobre el libro de cocina que tenía en el regazo. Al oír la voz de su marido se puso en pie sobresaltada y se encaró con él con la mente profundamente dormida y los ojos abiertos del todo.

- Ayude a la señorita Vanstone -dijo el capitán-. Y la próxima vez que se duerma en la silla, hágalo derecha. No me moleste durmiéndose torcida.

La señora Wragge abrió los ojos aún más y miró a Magdalen con asombro impotente.

- ¿Está desayunando el capitán a la luz de las bujías? -preguntó dócilmente-. ¿No le he hecho la tortilla?

Antes de que la voz correctora de su marido pudiera aplicarle un nuevo estimulante, Magdalen la cogió compasivamente por el brazo y la condujo fuera de la habitación.

- ¿Otro objetivo además del que yo conozco? -repitió el capitán Wragge cuando se quedó solo-. ¿Habrá un caballero en la sombra después de todo? ¿Se prepara alguna maldad con la que yo no he contado?

CAPÍTULO III

Hacia las seis de la mañana siguiente, la luz que bañaba el rostro de Magdalen la despertó en el cuarto de Rosemary Lane. Salió del reposo de la noche sin sueños con la dolorosa sensación de perplejidad que aqueja a cuantos despiertan en una cama extraña. «¡Norah!», llamó sin pensar cuando abrió los ojos. Al poco también despertó su cerebro y sus sentidos le dijeron la verdad. Miró a un lado y a otro de la mísera habitación reconociéndola con asco. El sórdido contraste que ofrecía aquel lugar con todo lo que estaba acostumbrada a ver en su dormitorio -el escaso mobiliario implicaba un abandono casi total de la elegante pureza de los hábitos personales a los que estaba acostumbrada desde la infancia- escandalizó ese sentido del respeto por el propio cuerpo que era una segunda naturaleza en una mujer refinada como Magdalen. Por despreciable que pareciera su influencia comparándola con su situación en aquel momento, la mera visión de la jarra y la jofaina en un rincón la llevaron a tomar su primera determinación de la mañana. En aquel mismo instante decidió marcharse de Rosemary Lane.

¿Cómo se marcharía? ¿Con el capitán Wragge o sin él? Magdalen se vistió evitando remilgadamente tocar nada de la habitación con las manos o la ropa y luego abrió la ventana. El aire otoñal era dulce y penetrante y el sol iluminaba ya con fuerza el pequeño fragmento de cielo que veía desde allí. Voces distantes de barqueros en el río y trinos de pájaros entre la maleza que coronaba la antigua muralla de la ciudad eran los únicos sonidos que quebraban el silencio matinal. Se sentó junto a la ventana e intentó recuperar el hilo de sus pensamientos perdido la noche anterior, cuando la venció el cansancio.

Lo primero que recordó fue al truhán del capitán Wragge.

El «agricultor moral» no había conseguido disipar la desconfianza de Magdalen por muy astutamente que hubiera intentado defender su causa confesando abiertamente las imposturas que había practicado con otros. Había elevado la opinión de Magdalen sobre sus habilidades, la había divertido con su buen humor, la había asombrado con su seguridad en sí mismo, pero la convicción primera de que era un granuja seguía tan intacta como en el momento de su encuentro. Si la única intención de Magdalen hubiera sido convertirse en actriz, habría rechazado de plano y de inmediato la más que dudosa ayuda del capitán Wragge.

Pero la peligrosa aventura en la que se había embarcado tenía otro objetivo a la vista, un objetivo oscuro y distante, un objetivo, con ocultos escollos en el camino muy distintos a los obstáculos superficiales que se interponían entre ella y el teatro. En la enigmática quietud de la mañana Magdalen volvió su atención hacia el segundo y más profundo de sus designios, y la despreciable figura del timador se alzó ante sus ojos con una nueva perspectiva.

Intentó cerrarle la puerta, volver a sentirse superior a él como hasta entonces.

Tras desabrocharse el vestido, se sacó del pecho la bolsa blanca de seda que había hecho con sus propias manos la noche de la despedida de Combe-Raven. Unos delicados cordones de seda ceñían la abertura. Lo primero que sacó al abrirla fue un mechón de cabellos de Frank atados con un trozo de hilo de plata; lo siguiente fue una hoja de papel que contenía los extractos copiados del testamento y la carta de su padre; lo último fue un apretado fajo de billetes de banco por valor de casi doscientas libras, el producto (como la señorita Garth había conjeturado acertadamente) de la venta de sus joyas y sus vestidos, en lo que la criada del pensionado la había ayudado secretamente. Guardó de nuevo los billetes con rapidez sin mirarlos y observó pensativamente el mechón de cabellos que tenía sobre el regazo.

- Sois mejor que nada -dijo, hablándoles con la caprichosa ternura de una niña-. Puedo sentarme y miraros de vez en cuando, hasta llegar a creer casi que estoy mirando a Frank. ¡Oh, amor mío, amor mío! -Su voz se quebró suavemente y se llevó el mechón de

cabellos a los labios con languidez- Se le cayó de los dedos al pecho. Sus mejillas se tiñeron de un encantador arrebol que se extendió hacia el cuello como si persiguiera los cabellos caídos. Magdalen cerró los ojos y dejó caer lentamente su hermosa cabeza. Olvidó el mundo y, por un mágico momento, el amor abrió las puertas del Paraíso a la hija de Eva.

Los ruidos triviales de la calle, en aumento a medida que avanzaba la mañana, la obligaron a regresar a la cruda realidad del presente. Alzó la cabeza con un hondo suspiro y abrió los ojos una vez más a la pequeña, sórdida y miserable habitación.

Los extractos del testamento y la carta -los últimos recuerdos de su padre, tan íntimamente asociados con el propósito que albergaba en su pensamiento- se hallaban aún ante ella. El color transitorio desapareció de su rostro cuando desplegó el pequeño manuscrito sobre la falda. Los fragmentos del testamento encabezaban la página; se limitaban a aquellas pocas palabras conmovedoras en las que su difunto padre suplicaba el perdón de las hijas por la mancha de su nacimiento y les imploraba que recordasen el amor y el cariño constantes con que se había esforzado por expiar su falta. Les seguía el extracto de la carta al señor Pendril. Magdalen leyó en voz alta las últimas frases llenas de melancolía: «Por amor de Dios, venga el mismo día en que reciba esta carta; venga y líbreme del horrible pensamiento de que mis dos queridas hijas se hallan desamparadas en este momento. Si algo me ocurriera y mi deseo de hacer justicia a su madre acabara (debido a mi lamentable desconocimiento de la ley) dejando a Norah y a Magdalen desheredadas, ¡no podría descansar en la tumba!». Bajo estas líneas, cerca del final de la página, se leía el terrible comentario sobre la carta que había escapado de labios del señor Pendril: «Las hijas del señor Vanstone no son hijas de nadie, y la ley las deja desvalidas a merced de su tío». Desvalidas cuando aquellas palabras fueron pronunciadas, desvalidas aún después de lo que ella había resuelto, después de todo lo que había sacrificado. La reivindicación de sus derechos naturales y los de su hermana, sancionados por la expresión directa de la última voluntad de su padre; el regreso de Frank desde la China; la justificación de haber abandonado a Norah; todo dependía de su desesperado propósito de recuperar a toda costa la herencia perdida de manos del hombre que había insultado a las hijas de su hermano y las había dejado en la miseria. ¡Y ese hombre seguía siendo una sombra para ella! Tan poco sabía de él que ignoraba incluso dónde residía en aquel momento.

Se levantó y paseó por la habitación con la gracia silenciosa y descuidada de una criatura salvaje en una jaula.

«¿Cómo llegar hasta él en la oscuridad? -dijo para sí-. ¿Cómo descubrir?» Se interrumpió de repente. Antes de que la pregunta hubiera adoptado la forma definitiva en su cabeza, recordó de nuevo al capitán Wragge. Era un hombre acostumbrado a trabajar en la sombra, un hombre con infinitos recursos, ingenio y audacia, un hombre que no vacilaría ante el ofrecimiento de un trabajo sucio si con él se llenaba los bolsillos: ¿era ése el instrumento que aguardaba su mano en aquel momento de necesidad? Magdalen tenía muy presentes dos de las necesidades que debía cubrir para poder avanzar un solo paso: la de saber más sobre el hermano de su padre de lo que sabía entonces y la de hacerle bajar la guardia disfrazándose mientras durara el proceso de investigación. Pese a su resuelta independencia, el inevitable trabajo preliminar de espionaje había de ser delegado en otra persona. En su situación, ¿había algún otro ser humano disponible además del truhán del piso de abajo? Ni uno solo. Reflexionó sobre ello con impaciencia durante largo rato. ¡Ni uno solo! Tenía ante sí una disyuntiva clara: o aceptaba al granuja, o le daba la espalda a su propósito.

Se detuvo en el centro de la habitación.

«¿Qué sería lo peor que podría hacerme? -se dijo-. Engañarme. ¡Bien! Si mi dinero sirve para tenerlo dominado, ¿qué más da? ¡Que se quede con mi dinero!» Volvió mecánicamente al asiento junto a la ventana. Al cabo de unos instantes estaba decidida. Poco después daba su fatal primer paso cuesta abajo: resolvía correr el riesgo y probar con el capitán Wragge.

A las nueve la patrona llamó a la puerta de Magdalen y le comunicó (con los amables saludos del capitán) que el desayuno estaba listo.

Magdalen encontró a la señora Wragge sola, envuelta en una voluminosa bata holandesa marrón, con la capa flácida y adornos de sucias cintas de color rosa. La antigua camarera del restaurante Darch estaba absorta en la contemplación de un gran plato que contenía una sustancia con aspecto de cuero, de un color amarillo moteado, profusamente salpicada de manchitas negras.

- ¡Aquí está! -dijo la señora Wragge-. Tortilla a las hierbas. La patrona me ha ayudado. Y esto es lo que nos ha salido. No le pida al capitán que le de un poco cuando venga; no, es un alma bendita. La tortilla no está buena. Ha sufrido algunos accidentes. Ha estado bajo la parrilla. Se ha caído en las escaleras. Ha escaldado al niño pequeño de la patrona, que se ha sentado encima. ¡Válgame Dios, no sabe ni la mitad de bien de lo que parece! No pida nada. Quizá él no se dé cuenta si usted no dice nada. ¿Qué le parece mi bata? Me gustaría tanto tener una blanca… ¿Tiene usted una bata blanca? ¿Qué adornos lleva? ¡Cuénteme!

La formidable entrada del capitán dejó suspendida de sus labios la siguiente pregunta. Afortunadamente para la señora Wragge, su marido estaba demasiado impaciente por conocer la decisión que Magdalen había prometido comunicarle para prestar su acostumbrada atención a las cuestiones culinarias. Cuando concluyó el desayuno, despidió a la señora Wragge y se refirió a la tortilla únicamente para decirle que tenía su permiso para «dársela al perro».

- ¿Qué le parece mi pequeña proposición a la luz del día? -preguntó tras colocar unas sillas para Magdalen y para él-, ¿Qué será: «Capitán Wragge, hágase cargo de mí», o «Capitán Wragge, buenos días»?

- Le responderé en seguida -contestó Magdalen-. Primero tengo que explicarle algo. Anoche le dije que tenía otro objetivo aparte del de ganarme la vida en el teatro…

- Discúlpeme -le interrumpió el capitán Wragge-. ¿Ganarse la vida ha dicho?

- Ciertamente. Mi hermana y yo dependemos de nuestros propios esfuerzos para ganarnos el pan.

- ¡¡¡Qué!!! -exclamó el capitán poniéndose en pie-. ¿Las hijas de mi próspero y llorado pariente por matrimonio, reducidas a ganarse la vida? ¡Imposible! ¡Es una locura, una extravagancia! -Volvió a sentarse y miró a Magdalen como si le hubiera infligido una afrenta personal.

- No conoce usted el alcance exacto de nuestra desgracia -dijo ella tranquilamente-. Le contaré lo que ha ocurrido antes de continuar: -Se lo explicó de inmediato en los términos más sencillos que pudo encontrar y con la menor cantidad de detalles posible.

El absoluto asombro del capitán Wragge centró sus pensamientos en el único resultado del relato que contaba para él. La recompensa de cincuenta libras que ofrecía el abogado por la señorita desaparecida ascendía rápidamente a un lugar en su estima que no había ocupado hasta entonces en ningún momento.

- ¿Debo entender -preguntó-, que está usted privada por completo de recursos en la actualidad?

- He vendido mis joyas y mis vestidos -dijo Magdalen, exasperada por la mezquina insistencia del capitán en el aspecto pecuniario-. Si mi falta de experiencia me impide trabajar en el teatro, puedo esperar hasta que el teatro pueda permitirse pagarme.

El capitán Wragge tasó mentalmente anillos, pulseras y collares, sedas, rasos y encajes de la hija de un caballero de fortuna en, digamos, un tercio de su valor real. Segundos después la recompensa de cincuenta libras volvía a hundirse en las profundidades de la estimación de aquel hombre juicioso.

- Perfectamente -dijo él con su tono más profesional-. No debe temer en absoluto, mi querida niña, que no pueda trabajar en el teatro si posee recursos financieros y si saca provecho de mi ayuda.

- Habrá de ser más ayuda de la que ya me ha ofrecido, o ninguna -dijo Magdalen-. Tengo ante mí dificultades más graves que la de abandonar York y la de abrirme camino en la escena.

- ¡No me diga! Soy todo oídos. ¡Explíquese, se lo ruego!

Magdalen meditó cuidadosamente sus palabras antes de pronunciarlas.

- Estoy interesada -dijo- en hacer ciertas averiguaciones. Si las realizo yo misma despertaría las sospechas de la persona sobre la que quiero indagar y poco o nada conseguiría saber. Si pudiera hacerlas un desconocido sin que yo apareciera en el asunto, sería para mí un servicio de una importancia mucho mayor que la que usted me ofreció anoche.

El rostro truhanesco del capitán Wragge se tornó grave y expresó la mayor atención.

- Puedo preguntarle -dijo-, ¿cuál sería la naturaleza de tales indagaciones?

Magdalen dudó. Naturalmente había tenido que mencionar el nombre de Michael Vanstone para informar al capitán sobre la pérdida de su herencia. Era inevitable volver a mencionarlo ahora si quería hacer uso de sus servicios. Sin duda lo descubriría él mismo por un sencillo proceso deductivo antes de que Magdalen dijera muchas más palabras, por mucho cuidado que pusiera al elegirlas. En aquellas circunstancias, ¿existía alguna razón inteligible para evitar la referencia directa? No y, sin embargo, prefería evitarla.

- Por ejemplo -continuó el capitán Wragge-, si se trata de indagaciones sobre un hombre o una mujer, sobre un amigo o un enemigo…

- Un enemigo -dijo ella rápidamente.

Su respuesta habría seguido manteniendo al capitán en la ignorancia, pero sus ojos le iluminaron. «¡Michael Vanstone -pensó el cauteloso Wragge-. Parece peligrosa; tantearé un poco más el terreno.»

- Ahora, con respecto a la persona objeto de esas indagaciones -prosiguió-, ¿está usted completamente segura de lo que quiere saber?

- Absolutamente -contestó Magdalen-. Para empezar quiero saber dónde vive.

- ¿Sí? ¿Y qué más?

- Quiero conocer sus costumbres, las personas con las que se relaciona, quiero saber qué hace con su dinero… -Reflexionó-. Y una cosa más -dijo-. Quiero saber si en su casa hay alguna mujer, una pariente o un ama de llaves, que tenga influencia sobre él.

- Todo bastante inofensivo por el momento -dijo el capitán-. ¿Y después qué?

- Nada. El resto es mi secreto.

Las nubes que ensombrecían la faz del capitán Wragge se disiparon una vez más. Volvió a su acostumbrada exposición de disyuntivas con su precisión habitual. «Esas indagaciones suyas -pensó-, significan una de dos cosas: ¡malas intenciones o dinero! Si son malas intenciones, me esfumaré. Si es dinero, me haré útil para ella pensando en el futuro.»

Los ojos vigilantes de Magdalen observaron con recelo el curso de sus reflexiones.

- Capitán Wragge -dijo-, si necesita tiempo para pensarlo, dígamelo claramente.

- No necesito ni un segundo más -replicó el capitán-. Deje su partida de York, su carrera teatral y sus indagaciones personales en mis manos. Aquí me tiene, a su disposición sin reservas. Dígame, ¿me acepta?

El corazón de Magdalen latía deprisa; los labios se le quedaron secos, pero lo dijo.

- Sí.

Hubo una pausa. Magdalen permaneció en silencio, luchando contra un vago temor sobre el futuro que su propia respuesta había despertado. Por su parte el capitán Wragge parecía absorto en la reflexión de una nueva serie de alternativas. Se llevó las manos a los bolsillos vacíos y tanteó proféticamente su capacidad como receptáculos para el oro y la plata. El brillo de los metales preciosos se reflejaba en su cara y la suavidad se reflejaba en su voz cuando se pertrechó de una nueva batería de frases y reanudó la conversación.

- La siguiente cuestión -dijo- es el tiempo. ¿Esas investigaciones confidenciales requieren nuestra atención inmediata o pueden esperar?

- De momento pueden esperar -contestó Magdalen-. Quiero asegurarme de que estaré libre de injerencias por parte de mis allegados antes de que se realicen.

- Muy bien. El primer paso para conseguirlo es batirse en retirada, disculpe la metáfora profesional de un militar, batirse en retirada de York mañana. Hasta ahí lo tengo todo muy claro, pero no doy en el blanco, como solíamos decir en la milicia, en cuanto a sus siguientes órdenes para ponerme en marcha. La dirección que tomemos debería ser escogida pensando en lograr sus objetivos en el teatro. Me hallará presto cuando sepa cuáles son esos objetivos. ¿Cómo se le ocurrió la idea del teatro? Intuyo el fuego sagrado ardiendo en su interior; dígame, ¿quién lo encendió?

Magdalen sólo podía contestarle de un modo. Sólo podía recordar tiempos que no volverían jamás y relatarle la historia de sus primeros pasos sobre las tablas en Evergreen Lodge. El capitán Wragge escuchó con su cortesía habitual, pero fue evidente que no sacaba una impresión satisfactoria de lo que oía. Un público compuesto por amigos era un público en el que él personalmente no confiaba, y la opinión del regidor era la de un hombre que hablaba con unos honorarios en el bolsillo y el ojo puesto en un futuro compromiso.

- Interesante, tremendamente interesante -dijo, cuando Magdalen concluyó-. Pero no es terminante para un hombre práctico. Necesito un ejemplo de sus dotes. Yo también he hecho teatro; conozco la comedia de *Los rivales* de principio a fin. Una muestra es todo lo que pido, si no ha olvidado el texto; una muestra de Lucy y una muestra de Julia.

- No he olvidado el texto -dijo Magdalen con pesar-, y conservo los libritos de mis diálogos. No me he separado de ellos; me recuerdan un tiempo… -Le tembló el labio y una punzada de angustia la hizo enmudecer.

- Nerviosa -comentó el capitán con tono indulgente-. No es una mala señal. Las más grandes actrices teatrales son nerviosas. Siga su ejemplo y sobrepóngase. ¿Dónde tiene esos papeles? ¡Oh, aquí están! Muy bien escritos y extraordinariamente pulcros. Yo le daré los pies; todo habrá terminado en un momento (como dicen los dentistas). Piense que la salita de atrás es el escenario y que yo soy el público. Suena la campanilla, se alza el telón, orden en el gallinero, silencio en el patio de butacas, ¡entra Lucy!

Magdalen intentó dominarse con todas sus fuerzas; reprimió la pena -la pena inocente, humana y natural por los ausentes y los muertos- que le suplicaba mil veces las lágrimas que ella rechazaba. Con resolución, con las manos frías apretadas, intentó comenzar. Cuando pronunció las primeras palabras familiares, el recuerdo de Frank volvió desde el mar y el rostro de su difunto padre la contempló con la sonrisa de viejos tiempos felices. Las voces de su madre y de su hermana charlaron tranquilamente en la fragante quietud campestre y los paseos del jardín de Combe-Raven se abrieron una vez

más a sus ojos. Se desplomó en una silla con un débil gemido, dejó caer la cabeza sobre la mesa y estalló en ardientes sollozos.

El capitán Wragge se levantó al punto. Ella se estremeció cuando notó que se le acercaba y lo alejó con un ademán vehemente.

- ¡Déjeme! -exclamó-. ¡Déjeme a solas un momento! -El acomodaticio Wragge se retiró a la habitación de delante, miró por la ventana y silbó por lo bajo.

- ¡El espíritu familiar de nuevo! -dijo-. Agravado por el histerismo.

Tras aguardar un par de minutos volvió para mostrar su interés.

- ¿Puedo ofrecerle alguna cosa? -preguntó-. ¿Agua fría? ¿Plumas quemadas? ¿Sales aromáticas? ¿Asistencia médica? ¿Llamo a la señora Wragge? ¿Lo posponemos hasta mañana?

Magdalen se puso en pie, arrebatada y encendida, con un desesperado dominio de sí misma en la expresión y una furiosa determinación en la

actitud.

- ¡No! -exclamó-. ¡Debo endurecerme y lo haré! Siéntese de nuevo y véame actuar.

- ¡Bravo! -exclamó el capitán-. ¡Láncese, hermosa mía, y sólo será un momento!

Magdalen se lanzó con un furioso desprecio por sí misma, con voz chillona y las mejillas encendidas como por la fiebre. Todo el encanto natural y juvenil de su actuación en tiempos mejores y más felices había desaparecido. El talento dramático que poseía emergió, directo y audaz, a la superficie, despojado de todo el atractivo que antes lo suavizaba y adornaba. Hubiera entristecido y decepcionado a un hombre con una mínima delicadeza de sentimientos. Al capitán Wragge lo dejó absolutamente electrizado. El capitán olvidó su cortesía y sus palabras largas. El espíritu innato de toda una vida de truhán brotó de él de forma irresistible en su primera exclamación.

- ¿Quién demonios lo hubiera pensado? ¡Resulta que sabe actuar! -En el instante mismo en que se le escapaban estas palabras, recobró su aplomo y volvió a su canales coloquiales de costumbre. Magdalen le interrumpió en medio de su primer cumplido.

- No -dijo-, por una vez le he sacado la verdad. No necesito nada más.

- Perdóneme -dijo el incorregible Wragge-. Necesita un poco de instrucción, y yo soy el hombre que puede dársela.

Tras esta réplica colocó una silla para Magdalen y procedió a explicarse.

Ella se sentó en silencio. En sus maneras apuntó una hosca indiferencia, sus mejillas volvieron a palidecer y fijó una mirada vacía y cansada en la pared que tenía delante. El capitán Wragge percibió estos síntomas de desánimo y descontento consigo misma tras el esfuerzo realizado y comprendió la importancia de animarla hablando claro y sin rodeos por una vez. Magdalen se había dado a sí misma un nuevo valor a los ojos mercenarios del capitán. Le había sugerido una especulación basada en su juventud, su belleza y su notable aptitud para la escena, que no se le había ocurrido antes de verla actuar. El viejo miliciano cambió de posición rápidamente. Él y sus planes habían dado media vuelta cuando Magdalen se sentó para oír lo que tenía que decirle.

- Comparto la opinión del señor Huxtable -empezó el capitán-. Es usted una actriz innata, pero debe ser educada antes de poder dedicarse al teatro. Estoy libre de compromiso, soy competente, he enseñado a otros, puedo enseñarle a usted. No confíe en mi palabra, confíe en el celo que pongo en mis propios intereses. Me interesa esmerarme con usted y hacerlo rápido. Podrá pagarme por mis enseñanzas de sus ganancias en el teatro. La mitad de su salario el primer año, un tercio de su salario el segundo y la mitad de la primera suma que cobre de los beneficios en un teatro

londinense. ¿Qué me dice? ¿Me interesa o no me interesa ayudarla?

Según las apariencias y tal como funcionaba el teatro, era evidente que el capitán había ligado sus intereses a los de Magdalen. Ésta así se lo expresó brevemente, aguardando a oír más.

- Cuatro o seis semanas de estudio -prosiguió el capitán- me darán una idea razonable de sus posibilidades reales. Todo talento se cultiva con la práctica y práctica es lo que el suyo no tiene. No podrá hallarla aquí, pues no podemos mantenerla prisionera en Rosemary Lane durante semanas. Lo que necesita es un mes al menos en un tranquilo lugar del campo, lejos de toda interferencia e interrupción. Confíe en mis conocimientos sobre Yorkshire y dé el lugar por encontrado. No veo dificultad alguna salvo la de batirnos en retirada mañana.

- Creía que había trazado sus planes anoche -dijo Magdalen.

- Muy cierto -convino el capitán-. Anoche los tracé y éstos son. No podemos irnos en tren, puesto que sin duda el pasante vigila la estación de York esperando que usted aparezca. Muy bien, usemos la carretera y partamos en un carruaje. ¿Dónde demonios lo conseguimos? Nos lo proporciona el hermano de la patrona, que tiene un tílburi y un caballo para alquilar. El tílburi llegará a la boca de Rosemary Lane mañana temprano. Yo saco a pasear a mi mujer y a mi sobrina para mostrarles las hermosas vistas de los alrededores. Llevamos con nosotros una cesta de merienda para indicar nuestro propósito a la vista de todos. Usted se disfraza con un chal, un sombrero y un velo de la señora Wragge, nos despedimos de York y partimos para pasar un agradable día de excursión, usted y yo en el asiento delantero, la señora Wragge y la cesta detrás. Bien. Una vez en la carretera, ¿qué hacemos? Continuar hasta la primera estación después de York hacia el norte, el sur o el este, según se determine posteriormente. Allí no habrá ningún pasante esperándola. Usted y la señora Wragge se apean después de abrir la cesta en la primera ocasión. En lugar de contener pollos y champán, contiene una bolsa de viaje con lo que necesitan para pasar la noche. Compran los billetes para un lugar previamente decidido y yo me vuelvo a York en el tílburi. Al llegar de nuevo a esta casa, recojo el resto del equipaje y mando llamar a la patrona. «Las señoras están tan entusiasmadas con tal lugar (un lugar falso, claro está) que han decidido quedarse allí. Le ruego que acepte el alquiler de una semana como se acostumbra en lugar de un aviso con una semana de antelación. Buenos días.» ¿Me espera a mí el pasante en la estación de York? Ni hablar. Compro el billete delante de sus narices, las sigo a ustedes con el equipaje, ¿y dónde queda el rastro de su partida? En ningún sitio. El hada se ha desvanecido y las autoridades se quedan con dos palmos de narices.

- ¿Por qué habla de dificultades? -preguntó Magdalen-. Las dificultades parecen soslayadas.

- Todas menos *una* -dijo el capitán Wragge poniendo un ominoso énfasis en la última palabra-. La gran dificultad de la Humanidad desde la cuna hasta la tumba: el dinero. - Lentamente guiñó el ojo verde, suspiró con hondo sentir y enterró sus insolventes manos en sus improductivos bolsillos.

- ¿Para qué quiere el dinero? -inquirió Magdalen.

- Para pagar mis facturas -respondió el capitán con sencillez conmovedora-. ¡Compréndalo, se lo ruego! Nunca he mostrado y nunca mostraré deseos de pagar ni un solo cuarto de penique a criatura humana que habite el globo. Hablo en su provecho, no en el mío.

- ¿En mi provecho?

- Ciertamente. Usted no puede irse tranquilamente de York mañana sin el tílburi y yo no puedo conseguir el tílburi sin dinero. El hermano de la patrona sólo me lo alquilará si ve el recibo de la factura de su hermana y si cobra el alquiler del día por adelantado. Permítame que sitúe la transacción desde un punto de vista comercial. Hemos acordado que me remunerará el curso de enseñanza dramática con sus futuras ganancias en el

teatro. Muy bien. Me limito a recurrir a mis perspectivas futuras y usted, de quien dependen esas perspectivas, naturalmente es mi banquero. Supongamos que mi parte de su primer año de salario se eleva a la suma totalmente inadecuada de cien libras. Divida esa suma por la mitad; divídala por cuatro…

- ¿Cuánto quiere? -preguntó Magdalen con impaciencia.

El capitán Wragge sintió la fuerte tentación de tomar la recompensa que encabezaba los carteles como base para sus cálculos, pero comprendió la gran importancia de moderarse entonces para el futuro y, necesitando en realidad unas doce o trece libras, se limitó a doblar la cantidad y dijo:

- Veinticinco.

Magdalen se sacó la bolsita de la pechera y le entregó el dinero maravillándose con desprecio por la cantidad de palabras que había malgastado el capitán para un timo a tan pequeña escala. En los viejos tiempos de Combe-Raven, veinticinco libras fluían de un golpe de pluma de su padre hacia las manos de cualquiera de la casa que las pidiera.

Los ojos del capitán Wragge se regodearon en la bolsita como los ojos de los enamorados se regocijan en sus amantes.

- ¡Feliz bolsita! -musitó, cuando Magdalen la devolvió a su sitio. El capitán se levantó, se precipitó a un rincón del cuarto, sacó su pulcro maletín y lo abrió solemnemente sobre la mesa entre ambos.

- La naturaleza del hombre, mi querida niña, la naturaleza del hombre -dijo, abriendo uno de sus gruesos libritos encuadernados en piel de becerro y papel vitela-. Hemos realizado una transacción. He de consignarla por escrito. -Abrió el librito por una página en blanco y escribió en la parte superior con esmerada letra mercantil: «La menor de las señoritas Vanstone: En relación con Horatio Wragge, antiguo miembro de la Milicia Real. Debe - Haber. 24 de septiembre de 1846 Debe: Valor estimado del interés de H. Wragge en el primer año de salario de la señorita Vanstone, digamos, £200. Haber: Pagado a cuenta £25». Tras completar la entrada (y haber demostrado además al doblar su estimación primera en la columna del debe que no había pasado por alto la facilidad con que Magdalen había accedido a su petición), el capitán apretó el papel secante sobre la tinta mojada y guardó el librito con el aire de un hombre que había obrado virtuosamente y que es incapaz de alardear de ello-. Perdóneme por abandonarla tan bruscamente -dijo-. Tenemos poco tiempo; debo asegurarme los servicios del tílburi. Si entra la señora Wragge, no le diga nada, no es lo bastante sagaz para confiar en ella. Si se toma la libertad de hacer preguntas, hágala callar inmediatamente. Sólo tiene que hablar muy alto. ¡Le ruego que haga suya mi autoridad y le hable tan alto como yo mismo! -Cogió su sombrero de copa, hizo una reverencia, sonrió y abandonó el cuarto.

Consciente de poco más aparte del alivio de quedarse sola, y no sintiendo impresión más clara que la vaga sensación de que se había producido un importante cambio en sí misma y en su situación, Magdalen dejó que los acontecimientos matinales vagaran como sombras por su cabeza y aguardó cansadamente lo que pudiera depararle el resto del día. Después de un rato, se abrió la puerta con suavidad. La figura gigantesca de la señora Wragge entró majestuosamente en la habitación y se detuvo frente a Magdalen con asombro solemne.

- ¿Dónde están sus cosas? -preguntó la señora Wragge en un estallido de impaciencia incontrolable-. He estado arriba mirando sus cajones. ¿Dónde están los camisones y los gorros de dormir, y las enaguas y las medias, y las horquillas y la grasa de oso y todo el resto?

- Dejé mi equipaje en la estación de ferrocarril -contestó Magdalen.

El rostro lunar de la señora Wragge se iluminó levemente. El inextirpable instinto de la curiosidad femenina intentó brillar en sus desvaídos ojos azules, vaciló lastimosamente y se extinguió.

- ¿Cuánto equipaje? -preguntó en tono confidencial-. El capitán se ha ido. ¡Vayamos a buscarlo!

- ¡Señora Wragge! -gritó una voz terrible desde la puerta.

Por primera vez en la experiencia de Magdalen, la señora Wragge hizo oídos sordos al acostumbrado estímulo. En realidad aventuró una débil protesta en presencia de su marido.

- ¡Oh, deje que se quede con sus cosas! -imploró la señora Wragge-. ¡Oh, pobrecilla, deje que se quede con sus cosas!

El índice inexorable del capitán señaló un rincón, bajó lentamente cuando su mujer se retiró siguiendo su dirección y se detuvo de repente en la región de los zapatos.

- ¿Oigo un taconeo en el suelo? -exclamó el capitán Wragge con expresión de horror-. Sí, lo oigo. ¡Otra vez con los zapatos en chancletas! El zapato izquierdo esta vez. ¡Cálcelo bien, señora Wragge, cálcelo bien! El tílburi estará aquí mañana a las nueve de la mañana -continuó, dirigiéndose a Magdalen-. No podemos arriesgarnos de ninguna manera a recuperar su baúl. Aquí tiene papel. Escriba una lista de lo que necesite. Yo mismo iré a la tienda, pagaré la cuenta por usted y volveré con el paquete. Debemos sacrificar el baúl; es realmente necesario que lo sacrifiquemos.

Mientras su marido hablaba a Magdalen, la señora Wragge había vuelto a salir sigilosamente de su rincón y se había atrevido a acercarse lo suficiente al capitán para oír las palabras «tienda» y «paquete». Dio una palmada con irrefrenable excitación y perdió inmediatamente todo dominio de sí misma.

- ¡Oh, si se ha de comprar, déjeme hacerlo a mí! -exclamó la señora Wragge-. ¡Va a salir a comprar sus cosas! ¡Oh, déjeme ir con ella, por favor, déjeme ir con ella!

- ¡Siéntese! -gritó el capitán-. ¡Recta! Más a la derecha, más. ¡Quédese donde está!

La señora Wragge cruzó las manos impotentes sobre el regazo y se deshizo mansamente en lágrimas.

- Me gusta tanto ir de compras -se defendió la pobre criatura-, ¡y tengo tan pocas ocasiones de hacerlo ahora!

Magdalen completó su lista y el capitán Wragge salió inmediatamente con ella.

- No permita que mi mujer la moleste -dijo con tono agradable al salir-. ¡Córtela en seco, pobrecilla, córtela en seco!

- No llore -dijo Magdalen, intentando consolar a la señora Wragge con palmaditas en el hombro-. Cuando llegue el paquete lo abrirá usted.

- Gracias, querida -dijo la señora Wragge, enjugándose los ojos dócilmente-. Gracias de corazón. No se fije en mi pañuelo, por favor. ¡Es tan pequeño! En otro tiempo tenía un montón de pañuelos preciosos con ribetes de encaje. Ya no me queda ninguno. ¡No importa! Me consolará desempaquetar sus cosas. Es usted muy buena conmigo. Me gusta. Escuche, no se enfadará, ¿verdad? Démonos un beso.

Magdalen se agachó hacia ella con la gracia sincera y la bondad de días pasados y rozó su mejilla descolorida. «¡Hagamos algo inofensivo! -pensó con una punzada en el corazón-. ¡Oh, hagamos algo inocente y bueno por los viejos tiempos!»

Notó que se le humedecían los ojos y se apartó en silencio.

Esa noche no pudo descansar. Esa noche las fuerzas desatadas del Bien y del Mal libraron una terrible batalla por su alma, y la batalla quedó todavía pendiente por la mañana. Cuando el reloj de la catedral de York dio las nueve, siguió a la señora Wragge hasta el tílburi y ocupó su asiento junto al capitán. Un cuarto de hora más tarde, York se perdía en la distancia y la carretera se abría ante ellos brillante y desierta a la luz del

sol.

FIN DE LA SEGUNDA ESCENA

ENTREACTO

CRÓNICA DE ACONTECIMIENTOS CONSERVADA EN EL MALETÍN DEL CAPITÁN WRAGGE

I

CRÓNICA DE OCTUBRE DE 1846

Me he retirado al seno de mi familia. Residimos en la apartada aldea de Ruswarp, a orillas del Esk, a unos tres kilómetros de Whitby tierra adentro. Nuestro alojamiento es confortable y disfrutamos de la bendición añadida de una patrona limpia. La señora Wragge y la señorita Vanstone me precedieron de acuerdo con el plan que tracé para llevar a cabo nuestra retirada de York. Al día siguiente las seguí solo con el equipaje. Al abandonar la estación tuve la satisfacción de ver al pasante del abogado conversando discretamente con el detective de la policía cuya llegada yo había profetizado. Lo dejé en pacífica posesión de la ciudad de York y de sus contornos. Él nos ha devuelto el cumplido dejándonos en pacífica posesión del valle del Esk, a cincuenta kilómetros de él.

Mis primeros esfuerzos por cultivar el talento dramático de la señorita Vanstone han dado frutos notables.

He descubierto que posee un extraordinario don como imitadora. Tiene el rostro adaptable, la voz maleable y la capacidad dramática que necesita una mujer para papeles de característica. Lo único que le hace falta son clases y práctica para aprender a confiar en sus propios recursos. Lo que he podido ver de ella ha revivido una idea que se me ocurrió originalmente durante una de las funciones «caseras» del difunto e inimitable comediante Charles Mathews. Recuerdo que en aquella época yo tenía negocios relacionados con el vino. Imitábamos los procesos naturales de envejecimiento en una trascocina de Brompton y producíamos un jerez pálido y curioso, con propiedades reconstituyentes, rotundo en la boca, el favorito de la Corte de España, a diecinueve con seis peniques la docena, botellas incluidas; véase registro de ese período. Los beneficios que obtuvimos mis socios y yo fueron pequeños; nos habíamos adelantado a los gustos de la época y debíamos dinero al comerciante de botellas. Habiendo agotado todos los recursos de mi ingenio por falta de dinero y viendo la gran cantidad de público que atraía Mathews, tuve la ocurrencia de emprender una imitación del gran imitador en persona en forma de una función «casera» ofrecida por una mujer. El único e insignificante obstáculo en nuestro camino fue el de hallar a la mujer. Desde entonces hasta ahora no había logrado superar ese obstáculo. Por fin lo he conseguido: he encontrado a la mujer. La señorita Vanstone posee juventud y belleza, además de talento. Edúquenla en el arte del disfraz teatral, procúrenle los atuendos adecuados para cada personaje, desarrollen sus cualidades para cantar y tocar, proporciónenle una buena dosis de parloteo ingenioso dirigido al público, anúncienla como «Una señorita en casa», asombren al público con un espectáculo teatral que dependa de principio a fin únicamente de los esfuerzos de esa señorita, confíenme la dirección de todo el evento, ¿y cuál será la consecuencia necesaria? La fama para mi bella pariente y la fortuna para mí.

Sometí estas consideraciones con la franqueza de siempre a la señorita Vanstone,

ofreciéndome a escribir la pieza, a dirigir todo el asunto y a compartir los beneficios. No olvidé reforzar mi alegato informándole de los celos con los que habría de enfrentarse y los obstáculos que se interpondrían en su camino si se dedicaba al teatro. Y terminé con una clara referencia a las indagaciones privadas que está interesada en realizar y a la independencia económica personal que está ansiosa por asegurarse antes de actuar según sus hallazgos. «Si se dedica al teatro -le dije-, un empresario comprará sus servicios y puede que reclame sus derechos justo cuando usted quiera librarse de él. Si, por el contrario, adopta mi punto de vista, será su propia dueña y su propia empresaria, y podrá determinar su rumbo como más le plazca». Esta última consideración pareció hacer su efecto. Se tomó el día para pensarlo y, cuando terminó ese día, dio su consentimiento.

Trasladé la transacción al papel inmediatamente. Nuestro acuerdo es eminentemente satisfactorio salvo en un aspecto. Ella muestra una desconfianza morbosa a la hora de escribir su nombre al pie de cualquier documento que yo le presente y declara tajantemente que no firmará nada. En tanto que le interese procurarse recursos pecuniarios para el futuro, se compromete verbalmente a seguir adelante. Cuando deja de interesarle, amenaza sin tapujos con marcharse avisando con una semana de antelación. Es una joven difícil de tratar; ha descubierto ya el valor que tiene su persona para mí. Mi único consuelo es que falsificaré las cuentas y mi bella pariente no se llenará los bolsillos demasiado deprisa si puedo evitarlo.

Mis esfuerzos por educar a la señorita Vanstone para el experimento venidero han variado tras escribir dos cartas anónimas en favor de la señorita. Viéndola demasiado impaciente por arreglar las cosas con sus amigos para prestar la debida atención a mis instrucciones, escribí un anónimo al abogado que dirige las pesquisas encaminadas a encontrarla recomendándole en tono amistoso que las abandonara. Lo envié adjunto a una carta para un amigo mío de Londres indicándole que lo echara al correo en Charing Cross. Una semana más tarde envié una segunda carta por el mismo medio solicitando al abogado que informara por escrito de si él y sus clientes habían decidido seguir mi consejo. Con una jocosa referencia al conflicto de intereses que se da entre nosotros, le pedí que dirigiera su carta a: «Golpe por golpe. Oficina de correos, West Strand».

La respuesta llegó a los pocos días, remitida confidencialmente, claro está, a la oficina postal de Whitby, como había convenido con mi amigo de Londres.

La réplica del abogado era sucinta y desabrida: «Señor: De haberse seguido mi consejo, tanto usted como su anónimo hubieran sido tratados con el desprecio que merecen. Pero debo respetar los deseos de la hermana mayor de la señorita Magdalen Vanstone sin discusión y accediendo a sus ruegos le informo a usted de que he desistido de toda acción futura con la condición expresa de que me he avenido sólo con el fin de facilitar la comunicación escrita al menos entre las dos hermanas. Incluyo una carta de la señorita Norah Vanstone. Si no se me comunica en una semana que se ha recibido, volveré a poner el asunto en manos de la policía. - William Pendril». Un hombre desabrido el tal William Pendril. Sólo puedo decir de él lo que un eminente noble dijo una vez de su hosco criado: «¡No me convencerían por nada del mundo de que tuviera el carácter que tiene ese individuo!».

Naturalmente leí la carta que adjuntaba el abogado antes de entregársela a su destinataria. La señorita Norah Vanstone decía hallarse angustiada por la falta de noticias de su hermana, le comunicaba que había hallado colocación como institutriz de una familia, que tardaría una semana en incorporarse a su empleo y que ansiaba recibir una carta que la tranquilizara antes de enfrentarse con la prueba de sus nuevas obligaciones. Cerré el sobre de nuevo y acompañé la entrega de la carta a la señorita Magdalen Vanstone con unas palabras de advertencia.

- ¿Está más segura de su valor ahora -dije- de lo que estaba cuando nos conocimos?

Ella tenía pronta la respuesta.

- Capitán Wragge, cuando me encontró en las murallas de York no había ido aún demasiado lejos para volver atrás. Ahora he llegado demasiado lejos.

Si realmente es eso lo que siente -y creo que lo es- la correspondencia con su hermana no puede ser perjudicial. Ese mismo día escribió una larga carta, derramó abundantes lágrimas sobre su redacción epistolar y se mostró marcadamente malhumorada e irritable conmigo cuando nos reunimos por la tarde. Carece de experiencia, pobre niña, carece lastimosamente de experiencia del mundo. ¡Qué consuelo saber que yo soy justo el hombre que necesita para dársela!

II

CRÓNICA DE NOVIEMBRE

Nos hemos instalado en Derby. La pieza está escrita y los ensayos se desarrollan sin incidentes. Se han previsto todas las dificultades, salvo la eterna dificultad del dinero. Los recursos de la señorita Vanstone son más que suficientes para nuestras necesidades personales, incluyendo el alquiler de un piano para practicar y la compra y confección de los vestidos necesarios. Pero los gastos de poner en escena la pieza están fuera de nuestro alcance. Un amigo de la profesión teatral que tengo aquí y al que esperaba interesar en nuestra empresa ha resultado hallarse desgraciadamente en un bache de su carrera. El campo de la compasión humana en el que podría haber recogido la necesaria cosecha pecuniaria está seco para mí por falta de tiempo para cultivarlo. No veo más solución -si queremos estar listos para Navidad- que tantear a uno de los vendedores de música de la localidad, del que dicen que es un especulador. Un ensayo privado en nuestro alojamiento y un acuerdo que llenará los bolsillos de un extraño codicioso: tales son los sacrificios que me impone la necesidad urgente de comenzar. ¡Bien! Sólo me queda un consuelo: engañaré al vendedor de música.

III

CRÓNICA DE DICIEMBRE. PRIMERA QUINCENA

Mal que me pese, el vendedor de música se ha ganado mi respeto. Es uno de los pocos seres humanos que he conocido en mi vida al que no se puede engañar. Se ha aprovechado magistralmente de nuestra impotencia y nos ha impuesto condiciones, para actuar en Derby y Notthingham, con tan profesional indiferencia a todo interés que no sea el suyo que, aficionado como soy a consignarlo todo por escrito, realmente no me veo con fuerzas para registrar semejante trato. Huelga decir que he cedido con mis mejores modales y he comunicado a mi hermosa pariente las miserables perspectivas pecuniarias que nos han sido ofrecidas. Ya nos llegará el turno. Mientras tanto, lamento cordialmente no haber conocido al vendedor de música en mi juventud.

Personalmente, no tengo queja de la señorita Vanstone. Hemos acordado que enviará la dirección (de la estafeta postal) a sus amigos regularmente a medida que nos traslademos de un lugar a otro. Además de comunicarse de tal modo con su hermana, envía noticias suyas a un tal señor Clare, residente de Somersetshire, que se ocupa de coordinar la correspondencia entre ella y el hijo. Tras cuidadosas investigaciones he descubierto que este último individuo se halla ahora en la China. Después de haber sospechado desde el principio que había un caballero en la sombra, resulta extremadamente satisfactorio saber que se ha retirado a la remota Asia. ¡Que siga allí muchos años!

La insignificante responsabilidad de encontrar un nombre artístico para nuestra dotada Magdalen ha sido depositada sobre mis hombros. Ella no tiene el menor interés en esa parte del asunto. «Déme el nombre que quiera -dijo-. Tengo tanto derecho a uno como a otro. Lo dejo en sus manos.» He accedido de buena gana a satisfacer sus deseos. Los recursos de la biblioteca mercantil incluyen una lista de útiles seudónimos, entre los cuales podremos escoger uno en cinco minutos cuando el admirable hombre de negocios que ahora nos oprime esté dispuesto a imprimir los carteles anunciadores. Sobre ese punto estoy muy tranquilo; toda mi inquietud se centra en la bella intérprete. No albergo la menor duda de que hará maravillas si no se la atosiga la primera noche, pero si el correo del día comete la maldad de ponerla nerviosa con una carta de su hermana, tiemblo por las consecuencias.

IV

CRÓNICA DE DICIEMBRE. SEGUNDA QUINCENA

Mi dotada pariente ha hecho su primera aparición en público y ha colocado los cimientos de nuestra futura fortuna. La primera noche acudió más público del que yo me había atrevido a esperar. La novedad de una velada de entretenimiento dirigida de principio a fin por los esfuerzos en solitario de una señorita (véase cartel anunciador) despertó la curiosidad de la gente y la sala estaba moderadamente llena. Por suerte ese día no llegó ninguna carta dirigida a la señorita Vanstone. Mantuvo una total serenidad hasta que se puso el primer vestido y oyó la campanilla para la música. En ese momento crítico se derrumbó de repente. La encontré sola en el camerino sollozando y hablando como una niña. «¡Oh, pobre papá, pobre papá! ¡Oh Dios mío, si me viera ahora!» Mi experiencia en tales asuntos me dijo de inmediato que me hallaba ante un caso en que se necesitaba sal volátil acompañada de un sabio consejo. En un momento conseguimos que recuperara el dominio de sí misma, que sus ojos echaran chispas y que se le encendieran las mejillas más que con el rouge. El telón se abrió cuando más la habíamos enardecido. Ella se lanzó a actuar exactamente igual que se había lanzado en la salita de atrás de Rosemary Lane. Su apariencia personal zanjó la cuestión de la acogida que tendría antes de que abriera la boca. Se lanzó a galope tendido a través de cambios de personajes, canciones y monólogos cometiendo docenas de errores sin pararse a enmendarlos, llevando al público en volandas en un torbellino sin esperar jamás a los aplausos. Todo terminó veinte minutos antes de lo que habíamos calculado. Lo llevó hasta el final y se desmayó en el sofá del camerino un minuto después de que hubieran bajado el telón. Dado que el vendedor de música había perdido la cabeza de puro asombro y que yo no tenía traje de etiqueta, encargamos al médico que presentara las debidas disculpas al público, que no dejó de pedir que ella saliera hasta que corrieron de nuevo el telón. Apunté un bonito discurso a nuestro orador médico desde detrás de la cortina y jamás en mi vida he escuchado semejantes aplausos de un público tan pequeño comparativamente hablando. Aquel homenaje me conmovió; me conmovió profundamente. Catorce años atrás arañaba yo unas migajas que echarme a la boca en aquella misma localidad leyendo el periódico (con comentarios explicativos) a los parroquianos de una taberna, y aquí estoy ahora, en la copa del árbol.

Ni que decir tiene que mi primer paso consistió en deshacerme del vendedor de música allí mismo. Vino a vernos a la mañana siguiente, sin duda con una generosa propuesta para extender el trato a otros lugares además de Derby y Notthingham. Le dijeron que mi sobrina aún se encontraba indispuesta y no podía recibirle y, cuando preguntó por mí, le dijeron que no me había levantado. De hecho en aquel momento me hallaba yo ocupado en defender patéticamente mi caso ante nuestra dotada Magdalen. Su respuesta fue sumamente satisfactoria. No quería comprometerse de un modo permanente con nadie, y menos aún con el hombre que se había aprovechado sórdidamente de su situación y la mía. Quería ser su propia dueña y compartir sus beneficios conmigo mientras necesitara el dinero y mientras a ella le conviniera seguir haciendo aquello. Hasta ahí todo iba bien. Pero la razón que dio luego para su halagadora preferencia por mí no me gustó tanto. «El vendedor de música no es el hombre al que empleo para hacer mis indagaciones -dijo-. Es usted.» No me gusta que recuerde esas indagaciones cuando aún no se ha disipado el desconcierto por su éxito. Por todos los demonios que no presagia nada bueno para el futuro, pero que nada bueno.

V

CRÓNICA DE ENERO DE 1847

Ya ha enseñado su pezuña hendida. Empiezo a tenerle un poco de miedo.

Al concluir nuestro compromiso en Notthingham (que sobrepasó los excelentes resultados de Derby), propuse que a continuación presentáramos nuestra función en Newark, toda vez que se hallaba enteramente en nuestras manos. La señorita Vanstone no opuso objeción alguna hasta que llegamos a la cuestión del cuándo, momento en que me dejó atónito poniendo como condición una demora de una semana antes de volver a aparecer en público.

- ¿Con qué objeto, si se puede saber? -pregunté yo.

- Con el objeto de hacer las indagaciones que le mencioné en York -respondió ella.

Yo me extendí inmediatamente sobre los peligros de dicha demora, presentándole todas las consideraciones posibles de todas las formas imaginables. Ella permaneció imperturbable. Intenté convencerla hablándole de gastos. Ella me replicó entregándome su parte de los beneficios de Derby y Nottingham, y con eso pagaba mis gastos contando casi dos guineas por día. Me pregunto quién eligió a la mula como ejemplo de obstinación. ¡Qué poco debía de saber aquel hombre sobre las mujeres!

No me quedó más remedio que aceptar. Anoté por escrito sus instrucciones como de costumbre. Mis primeros pasos debían encaminarse a descubrir la dirección del señor Michael Vanstone; también tenía que descubrir cuánto tiempo era probable que viviera allí y si había vendido Combe-Raven. Mis siguientes pesquisas debían informarme sobre sus costumbres, cómo se gastaba el dinero, quiénes eran sus amigos más íntimos y el tipo de relación que mantenía con su hijo, el señor Noel Vanstone, que ahora vivía con él. Finalmente, mis investigaciones debían descubrir si existía alguna pariente o alguna mujer que ejerciera autoridad en la casa y cuya influencia sobre el padre o el hijo fuera bien conocida.

Si mis largos años de práctica en el cultivo de la compasión humana no me hubieran acostumbrado a indagar en los asuntos de otras personas, me habría resultado bastante difícil despejar algunos de aquellos interrogantes en el curso de una semana. En cualquier caso, me beneficié de mis pasadas experiencias y volví a Nottingham con las respuestas un día antes del tiempo que me había sido otorgado. Aquí están, en el mismo orden, para comodidad de futuras referencias:

(1.) El señor Michael Vanstone reside ahora en Germán Place, Brighton, y es probable que siga allí, pues cree que el aire le sienta bien. Llegó a Londres desde Suiza el pasado mes de septiembre y vendió la propiedad de Combe-Raven inmediatamente después de su llegada.

(2.) Sus costumbres son secretas y retiradas. Rara vez visita a otras personas o recibe en su casa. Se supone que parte de su dinero lo tiene en Fondos Públicos y parte en inversiones ferroviarias, que han sobrevivido al pánico de mil ochocientos cuarenta y seis y están aumentando rápidamente de valor. Se dice que es un especulador audaz. Desde que llegó a Inglaterra ha invertido con gran acierto en propiedades inmobiliarias. Tiene varias casas en partes aisladas de Londres y varias más en ciertos balnearios de la costa este, en los que se ha apreciado un auge de su prestigio. En todos estos casos se comenta que ha obtenido acuerdos extraordinariamente buenos.

(3.) No es fácil descubrir quiénes son sus amigos íntimos. Sólo se han averiguado dos nombres. El primero es el almirante Bartram, del que se supone que recibió ciertos favores del señor Michael Vanstone en años pretéritos. El segundo es el señor George

Bartram, sobrino del almirante, que se aloja ahora en la casa de German Place realizando una corta visita. El señor George Bartram es hijo de la hermana del difunto señor Andrew Vanstone, también fallecida. Es por lo tanto primo del señor Noel Vanstone. Este último -es decir, el señor Noel Vanstone- tiene una salud delicada y vive en perfecta armonía con su padre en German Place.

(4.) No hay parientes del sexo femenino en el círculo familiar del señor Michael Vanstone, pero hay un ama de llaves que ha estado a su servicio desde la muerte de su esposa y que ha adquirido una gran influencia sobre padre e hijo. Es originaria de Suiza, mayor y viuda. Su nombre es señora Lecount.

Al depositar estos pormenores en manos de la señorita Vanstone, no hizo ningún comentario, limitándose a darme las gracias. Yo procuré incitarla a la confidencia. No obtuve resultado; tan sólo una nueva expresión de cortesía y una súbita desviación hacia el tema del espectáculo. Muy bien. Si ella no me da la información que quiero, la conclusión es obvia: tendré que obtenerla por mi cuenta.

Consideraciones financieras reclaman lo que resta de página. Volvamos a los negocios.

Declaración financiera Tercera semana de enero

Lugar visitado Funciones

Newark Dos

Ingresos netos anotados Ingresos netos recibidos realmente

£25 £32 con 10 chelines

División aparente de los beneficios División real de los beneficios

Señorita Vanstone £12. 10 Señorita Vanstone £12. 10

Yo £12. 10 Yo £20. 0

Suplemento personal de la semana,

o digamos

Testimonio personal

£7 con 10 chelines

Verificación, H. WRAGGE Visto bueno, H. WRAGGE

La siguiente fortaleza de la compasión británica que tomaremos por asalto será Sheffield. Empezamos la primera semana de febrero.

VI

CRÓNICA DE FEBRERO

La práctica ha dado a mi bella pariente la confianza que yo predije que adquiriría con el tiempo. Su talento para disfrazar su identidad encarnando a diferentes personajes deja al público tan asombrado que las mismas personas acuden dos veces para descubrir cómo lo hace. El público inglés tiene el amable defecto de no saber cuándo han tenido suficiente de algo bueno. Llegaron a pedir que se repitiera uno de sus personajes, una señora de edad del norte para la que había tomado como ejemplo a la honorable preceptora de la familia del difunto señor Vanstone a la que me presenté en Combe-Raven. Esa actuación en particular los deja boquiabiertos. No me extraña. Jamás en toda mi experiencia teatral se había visto en público a una joven de diecinueve años aparentando la vejez de forma tan extraordinaria.

Veo que estoy escribiendo en un tono más comedido que de costumbre. Echo de menos mi característica pincelada de humor. Lo cierto es que me deprime pensar en el futuro. En el culmen de nuestra prosperidad, mi perversa pupila se aferra a su tonta disputa familiar. Me siento a merced del primer capricho que se le ocurra con respecto a Vanstone; yo, el arquitecto de su fortuna. Qué lamentable, por mi vida, qué lamentable.

La señorita Vanstone ha actuado ya sobre las indagaciones que me obligó a llevar a cabo. Ha escrito dos cartas al señor Michael Vanstone.

La primera carta no obtuvo respuesta. De la segunda recibió contestación. Con su infernal inteligencia me impidió que la interceptara de forma imprevista. Más tarde, cuando ella ya había abierto y leído la carta, le tendí otra trampa. Tuvo éxito, pero nada más. Dispuse de medio minuto para mirar el interior del sobre en su ausencia. No contenía más que su propia carta devuelta. No es de las que se tragan un insulto semejante sin hacer nada. Esto será causa de alguna maldad: maldad contra Michael Vanstone, que no tiene la más mínima importancia; y maldad contra mí, y eso sí que es un asunto realmente serio.

VII

CRÓNICA DE MARZO

Tras actuar en Sheffield y en Manchester, nos hemos trasladado a Liverpool, Preston y Lancaster. Otro cambio en esa veleta de mujer. No ha escrito más cartas a Michael Vanstone y se ha vuelto tan impaciente por ganar dinero como yo. Estamos obteniendo pingües beneficios y nos matamos trabajando. No me gusta ese cambio en ella; tiene un objetivo en mente, o no mostraría un ansia tan extraordinaria por llenar la bolsa. Nada de lo que haga -ni falsificar las cuentas ni presentar falsos testimonios- puede evitar que esa bolsa permanezca vacía. El éxito del espectáculo y su propia agudeza para mirar por sus intereses me han obligado literalmente a proceder con comparativa honradez. Ella se embolsa más de un tercio de los beneficios desafiando mis arduos esfuerzos por impedírselo. ¡Y todo esto a mi edad! ¡Todo esto después de una larga y fructífera carrera como agricultor moral! Los signos de admiración son muy poca cosa, pero expresan mis sentimientos y los utilizo con franqueza.

VIII

CRÓNICA DE ABRIL Y MAYO

Hemos visitado unas cuantas ciudades importantes más y ahora nos hallamos en Birmingham. Consultando mis libros descubro que la señorita Vanstone ha obtenido con el espectáculo y hasta la fecha la enorme suma de casi cuatrocientas libras. Es muy posible que mis beneficios asciendan a cien o doscientas miserables libras más, pero yo soy el arquitecto de su fortuna -el editor, por así decirlo, de su libro- y si algo estoy es mal pagado.

Realicé el descubrimiento mencionado el día veintinueve, fecha del aniversario de la Restauración de mi Real Predecesor en el campo de la compasión humana, Carlos II. Acababa apenas de cerrar mi maletín cuando la ingrata muchacha, cuya reputación he labrado yo, entró en el cuarto y me dijo sin más preámbulos que la relación comercial entre nosotros había llegado a su fin por el momento.

No intentaré describir mis propias sensaciones, me limito a registrar los hechos. Me informó, aparentando un absoluto aplomo, de que necesitaba descansar y de que tenía «nuevos objetivos en perspectiva». Pudiera ser que me pidiera ayuda para alcanzarlos y pudiera ser que volviera al mundo del espectáculo. En cualquier caso bastaría con que intercambiáramos nuestras direcciones para poder escribirnos en caso de necesidad. No deseaba dejarme demasiado bruscamente, por lo que se quedaría el día siguiente (que era domingo) y partiría el lunes por la mañana. Tal fue su explicación en tan pocas palabras.

Sabía por experiencia que de nada me serviría protestar. No tenía autoridad alguna sobre ella. El único camino sensato en aquella emergencia era descubrir en qué dirección apuntaban mis intereses y tomar esa dirección sin perder un instante en vacilaciones innecesarias.

Poco he tenido que reflexionar después para convencerme de que tiene un plan muy bien trazado contra Michael Vanstone. Es joven, hermosa, inteligente y carece de escrúpulos; ha ganado dinero para subsistir y dispone de tiempo más que suficiente para averiguar el punto débil de un anciano, y va a atacar por sorpresa al señor Michael Vanstone con las legítimas armas de su sexo. ¿Es posible que me quiera incluir en un plan semejante? Lo dudo. ¿Es sólo que está impaciente por deshacerse de mí en términos amistosos? Es probable. ¿Soy yo el tipo de hombre que permite a su propia pupila que lo trate así? Decididamente no; soy un hombre que decide su rumbo mediante una clara sucesión de alternativas, y éstas son:

Primera alternativa: Declarar que me someto a su propuesta; intercambiar direcciones y luego vigilar privadamente todos sus movimientos futuros. Segunda alternativa: Expresar una afectuosa inquietud en calidad de pariente y amenazar con avisar a su hermana y al abogado si persiste en sus designios. Tercera alternativa: Utilizar la información que poseo del modo más provechoso convirtiéndola en una mercancía negociable entre el señor Michael Vanstone y yo. Por el momento me inclino por la última de las tres, pero es una decisión demasiado importante para precipitarse. Hoy estamos sólo a veintinueve. Suspenderé mi crónica de acontecimientos hasta el lunes.

31 de mayo. Tanto mis alternativas como sus planes se han desbaratado.

El periódico llegó después del desayuno, como de costumbre. Hojeándolo descubrí esta memorable entrada entre las necrológicas del día: «El 29 del corriente, en Brighton, el señor Michael Vanstone, antes residente en Zurich, a la edad de 77 años».

La señorita Vanstone estaba presente cuando leí esas dos sorprendentes líneas. Se había puesto el sombrero, tenía los baúles preparados y aguardaba con impaciencia que fuera la hora de irse a la estación. Le tendí el periódico sin decir una palabra. Ella miró el lugar que le señalaba, muda a su vez, y leyó la noticia de la muerte de Michael Vanstone.

El periódico se le cayó de la mano y de repente se cubrió la cara con el velo. Conseguí vislumbrar su rostro antes de que me lo ocultara. Tuvo un efecto sobre mí alarmante en extremo. Por decirlo con mi acostumbrada pincelada de humor, su rostro me informó de que el acto más sensato que el señor Michael Vanstone, antes residente en Zurich, había llevado a cabo en toda su vida, fue el que realizó en Brighton el día 29 del corriente.

El absoluto silencio que reinaba en la habitación resultaba especialmente desagradable dadas las circunstancias, por lo que decidí hacer un comentario. El tema me lo proporcionó la consideración hacia mis propios intereses. Mencioné el espectáculo.

- Después de lo que ha ocurrido -dije-, supongo que continuaremos con nuestras actuaciones como de costumbre.

- No -dijo ella, tras el velo-. Continuaremos con mis indagaciones.

- ¿Indagaciones sobre un difunto?

- Sobre el hijo del difunto.

- ¿El señor Noel Vanstone?

- Sí, el señor Noel Vanstone.

No disponiendo de velo con que taparme la cara, me agaché y recogí el periódico. Su diabólica determinación me desbordó completamente por unos instantes. De hecho tuve que calmarme antes de poder dirigirle la palabra de nuevo.

- ¿Son las nuevas indagaciones tan inofensivas como las anteriores? -pregunté.

- Totalmente.

- ¿Qué debo descubrir?

- Quiero saber si el señor Noel Vanstone permanece en Brighton después del funeral.

- ¿Y si no es así?

- Si no es así, quiero saber su nueva dirección, sea cual sea.

- Sí. ¿Y qué más?

- Además, quiero que averigüe si el hijo heredará todo el dinero del padre.

Empecé a ver por dónde quería ir. La palabra dinero me alivió; volví a sentirme en mi propio terreno.

- ¿Algo más? -pregunté.

- Sólo una cosa -respondió-. Compruebe, por favor, si la señora Lecount, el ama de llaves, continúa al servicio del señor Noel Vanstone o no.

Su voz se alteró un tanto al nombrar a la señora Lecount; evidentemente es lo bastante perspicaz para desconfiar ya del ama de llaves.

- ¿Me serán pagados los gastos como es habitual? -pregunté.

- Como es habitual.

- ¿Cuándo debo partir en dirección a Brighton?

- Lo antes posible.

Se puso en pie y abandonó la habitación. Tras unos instantes de duda, decidí ejecutar el nuevo encargo. Cuantas más indagaciones privadas realice para mi bella pariente, más difícil le resultará deshacerse de su sinceramente suyo, Horatio Wragge.

Nada hay que me impida partir para Brighton mañana. Así pues, será mañana. Si el señor Noel Vanstone hereda los bienes de su padre, será el único ser humano que disfrute de ventajas pecuniarias que no me inspire un sentimiento de profunda envidia.

IX

CRÓNICA DE JUNIO

Día 9. Regresé ayer con mi información. Aquí está, anotada privadamente para comodidad de futuras referencias.

El señor Noel Vanstone ha abandonado Brighton y se ha trasladado a Londres, a una de las casas vacías de su difunto padre en Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth, con el propósito de efectuar ciertas transacciones. Esta elección especialmente mezquina del lugar de residencia por parte de un caballero de fortuna produce la impresión de que no es fácil separar al señor N.V. de su dinero.

El señor Noel Vanstone se ha calzado los zapatos del difunto en las circunstancias siguientes. Al parecer, curiosamente el señor Michael Vanstone murió sin testar igual que el señor Andrew Vanstone. Con la diferencia entre los casos de que el hermano pequeño dejó un testamento informal y el hermano mayor no ha dejado ninguno en absoluto. Incluso los hombres más duros tienen sus debilidades, y la del señor Michael Vanstone parece haber sido un insuperable terror a prever el hecho de su propia muerte. Su hijo, su ama de llaves y su abogado habían intentado por todos los medios convencerle de que hiciera testamento sin alterar en lo más mínimo su obstinada determinación a aplazar la ejecución del único deber que se sabe que ha dejado de cumplir. Dos médicos le atendieron durante su enfermedad postrera, le advirtieron de que su edad era demasiado avanzada para recobrarse y fue en vano. Él mismo declaró estar totalmente decidido a no morirse. Sus últimas palabras en este mundo (como conseguí descubrir por boca de la enfermera que ayudaba a la señora Lecount) fueron: «Estoy mejorando por momentos; mande preparar el simón inmediatamente y lléveme a dar un paseo». Esa misma noche la Muerte demostró ser la más terca de los dos y dejó que el hijo (único descendiente) heredara sus bienes siguiendo el curso normal de la ley. Nadie duda de que el resultado hubiera sido el mismo de haberse redactado un testamento. Padre e hijo se tenían la mayor de las confianzas y siempre se los había visto vivir juntos en perfecta armonía.

La señora Lecount sigue al servicio del señor Noel Vanstone desempeñando el mismo cargo de ama de llaves que ocupaba con su padre, y le ha acompañado a su nueva residencia en Vauxhall Walk. Se admite generalmente que ella ha salido perjudicada por el giro de los acontecimientos. Si el señor Michael Vanstone hubiera hecho testamento, sin duda le habría legado una bonita suma. Ahora depende del sentido de la gratitud del señor Noel Vanstone y no es probable, diría yo, que permita que ese sentido se adormezca por falta de un pequeño y oportuno estímulo. No sabría decir por el momento si las intenciones futuras de mi bella pariente apuntan hacia la maldad o el dinero. En cualquiera de los dos casos, me arriesgo a predecir que hallará un difícil obstáculo en la señora Lecount.

Hasta aquí mi información al día de hoy. La forma en que la recibió la señorita Vanstone demostró la más ingrata desconfianza hacia mi persona. No me hizo ninguna confidencia, limitándose a expresar su agradecimiento. Una muchacha astuta, una muchacha diabólicamente astuta. Pero no se puede dejar de lado a un hombre siempre que se quiera, sobre todo cuando ese hombre se llama Wragge.

Ni una palabra sobre el espectáculo, nada sobre un nuevo cambio de aires. Muy bien. Mi mano derecha apuesta con mi mano izquierda. Diez a una a que inicia correspondencia con el hijo igual que hizo con el padre. Diez a una a que escribe a Noel Vanstone antes de que termine el mes.

Día 21. Ha enviado una carta con el correo de hoy. Una larga carta en apariencia, pues pegó dos sellos en el sobre. (Memorándum privado dirigido a mí mismo. Aguardar la respuesta.)

Días 22, 23 y 24. (Continuación de memorándum privado. Aguardar la respuesta.)

Día 25. La respuesta ha llegado. Como antiguo militar, era natural que empleara una estratagema para acceder a ella. He sido recompensado con el éxito que acompaña a cuantos perseveran de corazón y por lo tanto he tenido acceso a la carta.

La escribe no el señor Noel Vanstone, sino la señora Lecount. En ella se sitúa en el más elevado tono moral expresado con maliciosa cortesía. La delicada salud del señor Noel Vanstone y su reciente pérdida le impiden contestar por sí mismo. Cualquier otra carta futura de la señorita Vanstone será devuelta sin abrir. Cualquier acercamiento personal tendrá el efecto inmediato de que se solicite la protección de la ley. Habiendo sido expresamente advertido contra la señorita Magdalen Vanstone por su difunto y llorado padre, el señor Noel Vanstone no ha olvidado aún el consejo de éste. Considera que se arroja una sombra sobre la memoria del mejor de los hombres al suponer que su línea de acción con respecto a las señoritas Vanstone puede ser otra que la adoptada por su padre. Esto es lo que él mismo ha indicado a su ama de llaves que le comunique. La señora Lecount se ha esforzado por expresarse con el lenguaje más conciliatorio que ha podido hallar; ha procurado no causar un dolor innecesario, por lo que se ha dirigido a la señorita Vanstone por el nombre de la familia (como fórmula de cortesía), y confía en que tales concesiones, que hablan por sí solas, no serán echadas en saco roto. Tal es la esencia de la carta, y así concluye.

Extraigo dos conclusiones de este pequeño documento. Primero, que acarreará serias consecuencias. Segundo, que la señora Lecount, pese a su cortesía, es una mujer peligrosa. Ojalá supiera cómo salir bien parado de todo esto; aún no lo sé.

Día 29. La señorita Vanstone ha abandonado mi protección y el lucrativo futuro del espectáculo dramático se ha ido con ella. He sido timado; yo, el último hombre bajo los Cielos que hubiera esperado escribir sobre sí mismo en tan vergonzosa situación: ¡me han timado!

Hagamos la crónica de los acontecimientos, que me muestran en el momento presente desde una perspectiva de lamentable impotencia. Pero la naturaleza de un hombre prevalece: debo consignar esos acontecimientos por escrito.

El anuncio de su cercana partida me fue comunicado ayer. Tras una nueva charla cortés sobre la información que le había procurado en Brighton, insinuó que era necesario llevar nuestras indagaciones un poco más lejos. Inmediatamente me ofrecí a realizarlas igual que antes. «No -dijo ella-. Esta vez no son de su estilo. Son indagaciones sobre una mujer, ¡y tengo intención de hacerlas personalmente!» Convencido en mi fuero interno de que esta su nueva resolución apuntaba directamente a la señora Lecount, probé a hacer unas cuantas preguntas inocentes al respecto que ella tranquilamente rehusó responder. A continuación le pregunté cuándo pensaba marcharse. Se iría el veintinueve. ¿Con qué destino? Londres. ¿Por mucho tiempo? Seguramente no. ¿Sola? No. ¿Conmigo? No. ¿Con quién, pues? Con la señora Wragge, si yo no tenía objeción. ¡Dios bendito! ¿Con qué propósito? Con el propósito de conseguir un alojamiento respetable, cosa que difícilmente podía esperar a menos que la acompañara una amiga de mayor edad. ¿Y me dejaba a mí, su amigo de mayor edad, completamente fuera del asunto? Imposible precisarlo por el momento. ¿No podía siquiera enviarle las cartas que pudieran llegar para ella a la que aún era nuestra dirección? No, ella misma lo arreglaría en la oficina de correos y, al mismo tiempo, me pediría una dirección en la que yo pudiera recibir una carta suya en caso de que fuera necesario comunicarnos en el futuro. Nuevas preguntas tras esta última respuesta no condujeron a nada más que a una pérdida de tiempo. Me la ahorré dejando de hacerlas.

Era evidente para mí que la posición en que nos hallábamos el uno con respecto al otro era la misma que existía antes del fallecimiento de Michael Vanstone. Volví, como entonces, a mi selección de alternativas. ¿En qué dirección apuntaban mis intereses personales? ¿En la de confiar en la posibilidad de que quisiera utilizarme de nuevo? ¿En la de amenazarla con la intervención de sus allegados? ¿O en la de convertir la

información que poseía en una mercancía negociable entre la rama próspera de la familia y yo? La última de las tres era la alternativa que había elegido en el caso del padre. La elegí una vez más en el caso del hijo.

El tren ha salido hacia Londres hace casi cuatro horas y en él se ha ido acompañada de la señora Wragge.

Mi mujer es demasiado estúpida, pobrecilla, para ser activamente valiosa en la actual emergencia, pero será útil pasivamente al mantener la conexión de la señorita Vanstone conmigo y, en consideración a esa circunstancia, accedí a cepillarme yo mismo los pantalones, a afeitarme solo y a someterme a las demás molestias de cuidar de mi persona durante un período limitado. Cualquier débil chispa de juicio que la señora Wragge pudiera haber poseído anteriormente parece haberse esfumado del todo. Después de recibir permiso para ir a Londres, nos obsequió con dos preguntas: ¿podía ir de compras?, ¿podía irse sin el libro de cocina? La señorita Vanstone respondió que sí a la primera pregunta y yo respondí que sí a la segunda, y a partir de ese momento la señora Wragge ha vivido en un estado de risas continuas. Aún estoy ronco por la repetida aplicación de estímulos orales y tuve el inexpresable disgusto de dejarla en el compartimiento del tren y ver que llevaba ambos zapatos en chancletas.

En circunstancias normales estos absurdos detalles no se hubieran conservado en mi memoria, pero, dado el presente estado de cosas, la desafortunada imbecilidad de mi mujer en su situación actual podría tener consecuencias que ninguno de nosotros ha previsto. No es ni más ni menos que una niña crecida y percibo con toda claridad que la señorita Vanstone confía en ella como no hubiera confiado en una mujer más sagaz, precisamente por esa razón. Conozco a niños grandes y pequeños bastante mejor que mi bella pariente, y yo digo: cuidado con todas las formas de inocencia humana cuando lo que te interesa es mantener un secreto.

Volvamos a los negocios. Aquí estoy, a las dos de una agradable tarde estival; me han dejado completamente solo para meditar el modo más seguro de abordar al señor Noel Vanstone por mi cuenta. Mis sospechas personales sobre su carácter avariento no producen efecto descorazonador en mí. En mis tiempos he obtenido prometedores resultados pecuniarios de gente tan apegada a su dinero como pueda estarlo él. La auténtica dificultad que es necesario combatir es el obstáculo de la señora Lecount. Si no me equivoco, esa señora merece una seria reflexión por mi parte. Concluyo mi crónica por hoy y le haré justicia.

Tres de la tarde. Vuelvo a estas páginas para registrar un hallazgo que me ha pillado completamente por sorpresa.

Después de completar la última entrada, recordé una circunstancia de la que me había percatado mientras acompañaba a las señoras a la estación esta mañana. Me he fijado entonces en que la señorita Vanstone sólo se ha llevado uno de sus tres baúles, y se me ha ocurrido ahora que una investigación privada en el equipaje que ha dejado atrás pudiera tener resultados beneficiosos. Yo, que en ciertas épocas de mi vida tuve la costumbre de cultivar la amistad de extraños cerrojos, no he tenido dificultad alguna en entablar una relación familiar con los baúles de la señorita Vanstone. Uno de los dos no contenía nada de interés para mí. El otro -utilizado para guardar los disfraces, artículos de aseo y otros accesorios usados en el espectáculo dramático- ha valido más la pena, pues me ha conducido directamente al descubrimiento de uno de los secretos de su dueña.

He hallado todos los trajes del baúl completos con una notable excepción. Esa excepción era el vestido de la vieja señora del norte, el personaje que ya he mencionado anteriormente como la mejor caracterización de mi pupila y para el que tomó como modelo la voz y las maneras de su antigua institutriz, la señorita Garth. La peluca, las cejas, el sombrero y el velo, la capa con rellenos para desfigurar hombros y espalda, las pinturas y cosméticos para envejecer su rostro y alterar su cutis: todo eso había desaparecido. Sólo quedaba el vestido, uno de seda de llamativo estampado, muy útil

para el teatro, pero demasiado extravagante para soportar una inspección a la luz del día. Las otras partes del atuendo son lo bastante serias para salir con bien de una inspección; el sombrero y el velo sólo están pasados de moda y la capa es de un sobrio color gris. Pero es evidente la conclusión que puede extraerse de tal descubrimiento. Tan cierto como que estoy sentado aquí que la señorita Vanstone va a iniciar la campaña contra Noel Vanstone y la señora Lecount bajo la apariencia de una persona de la que ninguno de los dos tiene el menor motivo para sospechar en un principio: la señorita Garth.

¿Qué camino he de seguir en tales circunstancias? Una vez conocido su secreto, ¿qué hacer con él? Son cuestiones arduas; estoy bastante confuso en cuanto al modo de afrontarlas.

Es algo más que el mero hecho de que haya decidido disfrazarse para avanzar en sus objetivos el causante de mi actual perplejidad. Cientos de chicas tienen el capricho de disfrazarse y se citan cientos de ejemplos año tras año en los periódicos. Pero mi ex pupila no debe confundirse ni por un instante con las aventureras corrientes que allí aparecen. Ella es capaz de traspasar con creces el límite de vestirse de hombre e imitar la voz y los modales masculinos. Tiene un don natural para adoptar distintos personajes como no he visto otro igual en una mujer, y lo ha practicado en público hasta que se ha sentido segura de sí misma y ha elevado a las más altas cotas su talento para disfrazarse. Una chica que coge por sorpresa a la gente utilizando una habilidad como ésa para alcanzar sus fines privados y que agudiza esa habilidad para abrirse paso hasta su objetivo con una determinación que ha vencido cuanto se interponía en su camino es una chica que experimenta con el engaño: un experimento nuevo y peligroso que conducirá, de un modo u otro, a resultados muy graves. Ésta es mi convicción, basada en una larga experiencia en el arte de engañar a mis congéneres. Digo de la iniciativa de mi bella pariente lo que nunca dije o pensé hasta que he conocido el contenido de su baúl. Por mi vida que las posibilidades a favor y en contra de que sea ella quien gane la batalla por su perdida fortuna están ahora tan equilibradas que soy incapaz de ver de qué lado se inclina la balanza. Todo lo que percibo es que se inclinará de un lado u otro, con absoluta certeza, el día en que entre disfrazada por la puerta de Noel Vanstone.

¿Hacia dónde apuntan ahora mis intereses? Por mi honor que no lo sé.

Cinco de la tarde. He llegado a un compromiso magistral: he decidido convertirme en un agente doble.

Con el correo de hoy he enviado a Londres una carta anónima para el señor Noel Vanstone. La remitirán a su destino por los mismos medios que utilicé con éxito para despistar al señor Pendril, y llegará a Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth, a primera hora de mañana por la tarde como mucho.

La carta es breve y se ciñe al tema. Advierte al señor Noel Vanstone, en un lenguaje sumamente alarmante, de que está destinado a ser la víctima de una conspiración, cuya principal promotora es una joven que ha mantenido comunicación escrita con su padre y con él. Le ofrece la información necesaria para garantizar su seguridad personal a condición de que haga que, para el que eso escribe, valga la pena correr el grave riesgo personal que supondrá tal revelación. Y finaliza estipulando que la respuesta ha de ser publicada en *The Times*, que ha de dirigirse a «Un amigo desconocido» y que ha de fijar claramente qué remuneración ofrece el señor Noel Vanstone por el impagable servicio que sugiere prestarle.

A menos que surja alguna complicación imprevista, esa carta me coloca exactamente en la posición que ahora me interesa ocupar. Si aparece el anuncio y la remuneración ofrecida es lo bastante cuantiosa para justificar que me pase al enemigo, al enemigo me pasaré. Si no aparece el anuncio, o si el señor Noel Vanstone tasa mi inestimable ayuda en un precio demasiado bajo, aquí me quedaré pasando el tiempo hasta que mi bella pariente me necesite, o hasta que yo haga que me necesite, lo que viene a ser lo mismo. Si la carta anónima cae en sus manos por accidente, hallará en ella alusiones

despectivas a mi persona, introducidas a propósito para sugerir que el redactor de la carta debe de ser una de las personas a las que me dirigí cuando realizaba sus pesquisas. Si la señora Lecount toma el asunto en sus manos y me tiende una trampa, rehusaré su tentadora invitación aparentando una total ignorancia sobre el asunto en el instante mismo en que una segunda persona aparezca en él. Sea cual sea el resultado, aquí estoy, dispuesto a sacarle provecho; aquí estoy, con la vista puesta en dos campos a la vez, con total serenidad y seguridad en mí mismo; un agricultor moral con dos cosechas a la vez y su hoz de timador preparada para cualquier eventualidad.

En la próxima semana, el periódico será para mí más interesante que nunca. Me pregunto de qué lado acabaré por estar.

LA TERCERA ESCENA

Vauxhall Walk, Lambeth

CAPÍTULO I

El viejo palacio arzobispal de Lambeth, en la orilla sur del Támesis -con su Paseo y sus Jardines del Obispo-, es una reliquia arquitectónica del antiguo Londres, inestimable para todos los amantes de lo pintoresco en la utilitaria ciudad actual. Al sur de este venerable edificio se encuentra el laberinto de calles de Lambeth, y casi a mitad de camino en la parte del laberinto de casas que está más cerca del río discurre la doble y sucia hilera de edificios conocida ahora, como en tiempos pretéritos, por el nombre de Vauxhall Walk.

La red de calles lúgubres que se extienden en la inmediata vecindad alberga una población en su mayor parte de la clase más baja. En aquellas donde abundan las tiendas, la sórdida lucha contra la pobreza se muestra desvergonzadamente sobre el sucio pavimento, reúne sus fuerzas a lo largo de la semana y, aumentando hasta formar tumulto el sábado por la noche, recibe el amanecer del domingo a la mortecina luz de gas. En barrios londinenses como éstos, míseras mujeres cuyos rostros jamás sonríen frecuentan las carnicerías, apretando con fuerza en la mano las reliquias de los salarios de los hombres que se han salvado de las tabernas, con ojos que devoran la carne que no osan comprar, con dedos ansiosos que la tocan con la misma avidez que los dedos de sus hermanas ricas tocan una piedra preciosa. En este distrito, como en otros distritos alejados de los barrios prósperos de la metrópoli, vagabundea el Londres repugnante -donde la inmundicia de las calles corre pareja a la de las ropas y el lenguaje-, amenazador y brutal, en las esquinas y las puertas de las botillerías; es la vergüenza pública de este país, una advertencia desatendida de conflictos sociales que aún están por llegar. Aquí la ruidosa presunción del progreso -que tanto ha reformado las maneras y tan poco ha alterado a los hombres- tropieza con la flagrante contradicción que esparce sus pretensiones a los cuatro vientos. Aquí, mientras la prosperidad nacional se deleita, como un nuevo Baltasar, en el espectáculo de su propia magnificencia, está la inscripción en el muro que advierte al monarca de que se ha pesado su gloria en la balanza y de que su poder ha sido hallado deficiente.

Enclavado en un barrio como éste, Vauxhall Walk sale ganando con la comparación y reclama para sí una respetabilidad que cualquier observador imparcial ha de reconocer. Buena parte de él sigue compuesta por casas particulares. Las tiendas esparcidas aquí y allá no se ven asaltadas por las muchedumbres de calles más populosas. El comercio no es turbulento, ni se incita al consumidor a «comprar» voceando las mercancías. Los amantes de los pájaros buscan la agradable tranquilidad del sitio, y las palomas se arrullan y los canarios trinan en Vauxhall.Walk. Carros y coches de punto de segunda mano, viejos armazones de camas, ruedas sueltas de carruajes para quienes puedan necesitar una que complete el juego, se encuentran aquí en el mismo depósito. Un afluente en el gran flujo de gas que ilumina Londres tiene su origen en fábricas establecidas en este lugar. Aquí los seguidores de John Wesley han erigido una iglesia construida antes del período de la conversión metodista a los principios de la religión arquitectónica. Y para colmo de sorpresas, aquí -donde miles de luces brillaron en otro tiempo, donde dulces sonidos llenaron de melodiosa música la noche hasta el amanecer, donde la belleza y la elegancia de Londres dieron fiestas y bailaron durante las temporadas estivales de todo un siglo- se extiende, hoy en día, una horrible franja de lodo y porquería: el cadáver abandonado de los Jardines Wauxhall convirtiéndose en polvo a la luz del sol.

El mismo día que el capitán Wragge concluía la última entrada en su crónica de acontecimientos, una mujer aparecía en la ventana de una de las casas de Vauxhall Walk y arrancaba del cristal un papel impreso que habían pegado en él con oblea para anunciar que se alquilaban habitaciones. Las habitaciones eran dos y se hallaban en el primer piso. Acababan de alquilarlas dos señoras que habían pagado una semana por adelantado, dos señoras que eran Magdalen y la señora Wragge.

Tan pronto como la dueña de la casa abandonó la habitación, Magdalen se acercó a la ventana y miró con cautela la hilera de edificios del otro lado de la calle, que tenían mayores pretensiones en tamaño y apariencia que el resto de casas de Vauxhall Walk; en una de ellas se había inscrito la fecha de construcción: el año 1759. Se hallaban separadas de la acera por pequeños jardines. Esta peculiaridad de su situación, añadida a la amplitud de la carretera que se interponía entre ellas y las pequeñas casas que tenían frente por frente impedía a Magdalen ver los números sobre las puertas u observar más que un esbozo general del atuendo y la figura de quien pudiera acercarse a las ventanas. No obstante, allí permaneció clavando la vista con impaciencia en una de las casas de la hilera que quedaba prácticamente a la misma altura que la suya, la casa que había buscado antes de entrar en su nuevo alojamiento, la casa habitada en aquel momento por Noel Vanstone y la señora Lecount.

Tras vigilar por la ventana en silencio durante diez minutos o más, volvió la vista de repente a la habitación para observar el efecto que su comportamiento podía haber producido en su compañera de viaje.

No apreció en ella la menor causa de aprensión. La señora Wragge se había sentado a la mesa y estaba absorta arreglando una serie de breves circulares y tentadoras listas de precios que imprimían los comerciantes para anunciarse y que arrojaban por las ventanillas al interior de los coches de punto cuando salían de la estación de Londres.

- A menudo he oído hablar de las lecturas ligeras -dijo la señora Wragge, cambiando con nerviosismo el orden de las circulares igual que un niño cambia con nerviosismo el orden de un conjunto de juguetes nuevos-. Aquí hay lectura ligera impresa en bonitos colores. Aquí están todas las cosas que voy a comprar cuando salga de tiendas mañana. Préstenos un lápiz, por favor. No se enfadará, ¿verdad? Tengo ganas de señalarlas todas. -Alzó la mirada hacia Magdalen, rió entre dientes gozosamente pensando en el cambio experimentado en su situación y palmeó la mesa con sus manazas, presa de un gozo incontenible-. ¡Sin libro de cocina! -exclamó-. ¡Sin zumbido en la cabeza! ¡Sin capitán al que afeitar mañana! Arrastro los pies, llevo la cofia torcida y nadie me grita. ¡Por mi vida que esto sí que son vacaciones! -Sus manos golpearon la mesa con más estrépito que antes hasta que Magdalen las silenció ofreciéndole un lápiz. La señora Wragge recobró su dignidad instantáneamente, apoyó los codos sobre la mesa y se sumergió en unas compras imaginarias el resto de la tarde.

Magdalen regresó junto a la ventana. Cogió una silla, se sentó tras la cortina y clavó la vista una vez más en la casa de enfrente.

Las ventanas del primero y del segundo piso tenían las persianas echadas. La ventana de la planta baja tenía la persiana subida y estaba entreabierta, pero no se acercó a ella criatura viviente alguna. A ambos lados de la calle se abrieron las puertas de las casas y empezó a salir y entrar gente. Docenas de niños se echaron a la calle para jugar e invadieron los pequeños jardines para recuperar balones y volantes perdidos. Riadas de personas caminaban en una u otra dirección de forma ininterrumpida. Carros abarrotados de mercancías pasaban rodando pesadamente de camino a la cercana estación o volviendo de ella. La incesante actividad de la vida cotidiana en aquel distrito se agitaba en todas partes menos en una. Transcurrieron las horas y allí seguía la casa de enfrente, cerrada aún, privada aún de todo signo de vida humana, dentro o fuera de ella. El único objeto que había decidido a Magdalen a aventurarse personalmente en Vauxhall Walk -el objeto de estudiar aspecto, maneras y costumbres de la señora Lecount y su señor desde un lugar de observación conocido únicamente por ella- había fracasado hasta ese momento. Después de tres horas de mirar por la ventana, no había descubierto ni siquiera si la casa estaba realmente habitada.

Poco después de las seis, la patrona estorbó el estudio de la señora Wragge extendiendo el mantel para cenar. Magdalen se sentó a la mesa en una posición desde la que seguía teniendo la misma vista por la ventana. No ocurrió nada. La cena llegó a su fin; la señora Wragge (adormecida por la influencia narcótica de hacer anotaciones en las circulares y de comer y beber con un apetito agudizado por la ausencia del capitán) se retiró a un sillón y se durmió en una postura que hubiera causado a su marido un agudísimo sufrimiento mental; dieron las siete; las sombras de la noche estival se alargaron furtivas sobre el pavimento gris y los muros pardos de las casas, y todavía la puerta de enfrente seguía cerrada; todavía la única ventana abierta seguía sin mostrar nada más que la negrura del interior, inerte e inmutable como si esa habitación fuera una tumba.

Los suaves ronquidos de la señora Wragge se hicieron más graves; la noche siguió su curso monótonamente. Eran cerca de las ocho cuando por fin ocurrió algo. La puerta principal de la casa de enfrente se abrió por primera vez y una mujer apareció en el umbral.

¿Era la señora Lecount esa mujer? No. Al acercarse, su vestido denotó que era una criada. Llevaba una gran llave en la mano y era evidente que se dirigía a realizar un encargo. Incitada, en parte por la curiosidad y en parte por el impulso del momento, que movía su impetuosa naturaleza a la acción tras la resistencia pasiva de muchos horas, Magdalen cogió su sombrero y resolvió seguir a la criada a su destino fuera cual fuese.

La mujer la condujo a la cercana y amplia calle de tiendas llamada Lambeth Walk. Después de andar un corto trecho y mirar a un lado y a otro con el aire vacilante de una persona que no está familiarizada con el vecindario, la criada cruzó la calle y entró en una papelería. Magdalen cruzó la calle a su vez y la siguió al interior.

La inevitable demora con que entró en la tienda en esas circunstancias hizo que Magdalen llegara demasiado tarde para oír lo que pedía la mujer. Sin embargo, alcanzó a oír las primeras palabras que pronunció el dependiente, las cuales le indicaron que la criada quería comprar una guía de trenes.

- ¿Se refiere a una guía para este mes o a una guía para julio? -preguntó el tendero, dirigiéndose a la clienta.

- El amo no me ha dicho cuál -respondió la mujer-. Lo único que sé es que se va al campo pasado mañana.

- Pasado mañana será uno de julio -dijo el tendero-. La guía que quiere su señor es la del nuevo mes. No saldrá a la venta hasta mañana.

La criada abandonó la tienda tras comprometerse a volver el día siguiente y emprendió el camino de vuelta a Vauxhall Walk.

Magdalen compró la primera chuchería que vio sobre el mostrador y regresó apresuradamente en la misma dirección. El descubrimiento que acababa de hacer era de gran importancia para ella y era consciente de la necesidad de actuar en consecuencia a la mayor brevedad posible.

Cuando entró en la salita de su alojamiento, encontró a la señora Wragge, que acababa de despertarse, sumida en una perplejidad soñolienta, con la cofia caída sobre los hombros y uno de los pies descalzos. Magdalen se esforzó en convencerla de que estaba cansada del viaje y de que lo más sensato que podía hacer era acostarse. La señora Wragge se mostró totalmente dispuesta a beneficiarse de su sugerencia siempre que primero encontrara su zapato. Por desgracia, mientras buscaba el zapato tropezó con las circulares apartadas en una mesita y recordó de inmediato su actividad de la tarde.

- Dénos el lápiz -dijo la señora Wragge, reuniendo las circulares con movimientos violentos y apresurados-. Todavía no puedo acostarme, no he marcado ni la mitad de cosas que quiero. Veamos, ¿dónde lo había dejado? «Pruebe el biberón de Finch para niños.» ¡No!, tiene una cruz; la cruz significa que no lo quiero. «Comodidad en el

campo. Los indestructibles pantalones de caza de Buckler.» ¡Oh, cielos, cielos! Me he perdido. No, aquí está. Aquí está mi marca. «Elegantes trajes de cachemira auténticamente oriental, suntuosos; rebajados a una libra, diecinueve chelines y seis peniques. No pierda tiempo. Sólo quedan tres.» ¡Sólo tres! ¡Oh, préstenos el dinero y vayamos a comprar uno!

- Esta noche no -dijo Magdalen-. ¿Qué le parece si ahora se acuesta y termina con las circulares mañana? Yo las pondré en la mesita de noche y podrá seguir tan pronto como se despierte; será lo primero que haga por la mañana.

Esta sugerencia recibió la aprobación inmediata de la señora Wragge. Magdalen la llevó a la habitación contigua y la acostó como a una niña con sus juguetes al lado. La habitación era tan estrecha, la cama tan pequeña y la señora Wragge, ataviada con la indumentaria blanca adecuada para la ocasión, con su cara de luna rodeada por el amplio halo del gorro de dormir, parecía tan grande y desproporcionada que, pese a su impaciencia, Magdalen no pudo reprimir una sonrisa al dar las buenas noches a su compañera de viaje.

- ¡Aja! -exclamó la señora Wragge alegremente-. Compraremos ese traje de cachemira mañana. ¡Acérquese! Quiero susurrarle algo. Fíjese en mí. ¡Voy a dormir torcida y el capitán no está aquí para chillarme!

En la salita había un sofá cama que la patrona preparó oportunamente. Una vez hecho esto y tras haberle llevado unas bujías, dejó sola a Magdalen para que pudiera trazar su rumbo futuro tal y como sus pensamientos le aconsejaran.

De las preguntas y respuestas que había tenido ocasión de escuchar por la tarde en la papelería se extraía claramente la conclusión de que a la temporada de residencia de Noel Vanstone en Vauxhall Walk le faltaba un solo día para llegar a su fin. La primera y prudente resolución de Magdalen, que consistió en pasar varios días observando sin ser vista la casa de enfrente antes de aventurarse a entrar en ella personalmente, había sido irremediablemente frustrada por el giro que habían tomado los acontecimientos. Se encontraba en el dilema de correr de manera precipitada todos los riesgos al día siguiente o de hacer una pausa y esperar una oportunidad futura que tal vez no se presentaría jamás. No veía un camino intermedio. Hasta que hubiera visto a Noel Vanstone con sus propios ojos y hubiera descubierto lo peor que podía temer de la señora Lecount -hasta que hubiera alcanzado este doble objetivo con la necesaria precaución de mantener en secreto su identidad- no podría avanzar un solo paso hacia la ejecución del propósito que la había llevado a Londres.

Uno tras otro pasaron los minutos de la noche; uno tras otro se sucedieron sus atropellados pensamientos y seguía sin llegar a una decisión, seguía dudando con una vacilación que era nueva en el conocimiento que tenía de sí misma. Por fin cruzó la habitación con impaciencia en busca del alivio trivial de abrir su baúl y sacar de él las pocas cosas que necesitaba para pasar la noche. El capitán Wragge no andaba desencaminado en sus sospechas. Allí, ocultos entre dos vestidos, estaban los elementos para disfrazarse que él había echado en falta en el baúl de Birmingham. Magdalen les dio la vuelta uno por uno para verificar que no había olvidado nada de lo que necesitaba y regresó una vez más a su puesto de observación junto a la ventana.

La casa de enfrente estaba sumida en la oscuridad hasta el salón. Allí, la persiana que antes estaba abierta cubría ahora la ventana: la luz que ardía tras ella le permitió ver por primera vez que la estancia estaba habitada. Sus ojos se iluminaron y se encendió su rostro al verlo.

- ¡Ahí está! -dijo en un susurro furioso-. ¡Ahí vive de nuestro dinero, en la casa cuyas puertas me ha cerrado la amenaza de su padre! -Dejó caer la persiana que había alzado, volvió al baúl y sacó la peluca gris que formaba parte de su disfraz teatral para el personaje de la vieja señora del norte. La peluca se había arrugado; Magdalen se la puso y se dirigió al tocador para peinarla-. Su padre le ha prevenido contra Magdalen Vanstone -dijo, repitiendo el pasaje de la carta de la señora Lecount, y rió amargamente mientras se miraba en el espejo-. Me pregunto si su padre le ha prevenido contra la

señorita Garth. Mañana es más pronto de lo que yo esperaba. No importa; mañana se verá.

CAPÍTULO II

Por la mañana temprano, cuando Magdalen se levantó y miró por la ventana, el cielo estaba encapotado, pero, a medida que se acercaba la hora de desayunar, la amenaza de lluvia fue disipándose y Magdalen pudo pensar en atender a la primera necesidad del día sin que el mal tiempo se lo impidiera: la necesidad de asegurarse la ausencia de la casa de su compañera de viaje.

A las diez, la señora Wragge se hallaba vestida, pertrechada con su colección de circulares e impaciente por salir. Antes Magdalen había tomado la precaución, de que se ocupara debidamente de ella la hija mayor de la patrona, una joven tranquila y de buenos modales, cuyo interés en la expedición despertó fácilmente con una pequeña suma de dinero para que se comprara una sombrilla y un vestido de muselina. Poco después de las diez, Magdalen despidió a la señora Wragge y a su acompañante en un coche de punto. Luego se reunió con la patrona -que se ocupaba entonces de arreglar las habitaciones superiores- a fin de averiguar con un oportuno y breve cotilleo cuáles eran los hábitos cotidianos del resto de moradores de la casa.

Magdalen descubrió que no había más huéspedes que la señora Wragge y ella. El marido de la patrona se pasaba fuera todo el día, empleado en una estación de ferrocarril. La segunda hija estaba a cargo de la cocina en ausencia de su hermana mayor. Los hijos pequeños se habían ido a la escuela y volverían a la una para comer. La patrona «cosía buena ropa interior para señoras» y pensaba ocupar toda la mañana en su trabajo en una pequeña habitación anexa a la parte posterior del edificio. Así pues, Magdalen tenía todas las facilidades para abandonar la casa disfrazada sin que la vieran, siempre que saliera antes de que los niños regresaran a comer a la una.

A las once las habitaciones estaban arregladas y la patrona se había retirado a sus ocupaciones. Suavemente, Magdalen cerró con llave la puerta de su habitación, bajó la persiana y comenzó de inmediato los preparativos para el peligroso experimento del día.

La misma aguda percepción de los peligros que debía evitar y de las dificultades que debía superar que la había llevado a dejar la parte más extravagante de su disfraz en el baúl de Birmingham, la hizo plenamente consciente de la gran diferencia entre un disfraz que se lleva a la luz del gas para entretener a un público y un disfraz adoptado a la luz del día para engañar a los ojos inquisidores de dos desconocidos. La primera pieza de ropa que se puso fue un viejo vestido suyo (hecho del material llamado «alpaca») de color marrón oscuro con un bonito estampado de pequeñas estrellas blancas. El único adorno del vestido era un doble volante alrededor del bajo, adorno que no desdecía en absoluto del atavío apropiado para una señora de edad. El modo de disfrazar la cabeza y el rostro fue el siguiente objeto de su atención. Se puso la peluca gris y la arregló con la destreza conseguida con la práctica constante, pegó cuidadosamente en su sitio las cejas falsas (bastante amplias y más oscuras que la peluca) con la goma que había llevado consigo con ese fin y se pintó la cara con materiales de uso corriente en el teatro para trocar la blancura de su cutis transparente en el color apagado, levemente opaco de una mujer enferma. A continuación procedió a hacerse las arrugas y marcas propias de la edad, y ahí se presentaron los primeros obstáculos. El artificio que tenía éxito a la luz de gas fallaba estrepitosamente de día; la dificultad de disimular el evidente carácter artificial de las marcas era casi insuperable. Volvió al baúl, sacó de él dos velos y, poniéndose su anticuado sombrero, probó el efecto que causaban uno y otro. Uno de los velos (de encaje negro) era demasiado grueso para llevarlo en verano sobre el rostro sin dar pie a comentarios. El otro, una sencilla red, permitía ver las facciones con la vaguedad suficiente para pintarse ciertas arrugas expresivas (muchas menos de las que estaba acostumbrada a utilizar cuando interpretaba el personaje) en la frente y en las comisuras de la boca. Pero el obstáculo así vencido no hacía más que crear una nueva dificultad: la de mantener el velo bajado mientras hablaba con otras personas sin ninguna razón obvia para hacerlo. Unos instantes de reflexión y una mirada casual a la pequeña paleta de cerámica donde

extendía las pinturas para caracterizarse sugirió a su rápida inventiva una excusa visible para llevar el velo. Lentamente se desfiguró enrojeciendo artificialmente el interior de los párpados de modo que parecieran afectados por una inflamación que ningún ser humano salvo un médico -y eso examinándola de cerca- habría dicho que era falsa. Magdalen se puso en pie de un salto y contempló triunfalmente el reflejo de su horrible transformación en el espejo. ¿A quién podía parecerle extraño que llevara el velo bajado y que pidiera permiso a la señora Lecount para sentarse de espaldas a la luz?

Su último paso consistió en ponerse la sencilla capa gris que se había llevado de Birmingham y que las manos experimentadas del capitán Wragge habían rellenado para disimular la gracia y la belleza juvenil de sus hombros y su espalda. Una vez completado el disfraz, practicó la manera de andar que, según le habían enseñado, era apropiada para el personaje -andar con una leve cojera- y, volviendo a mirarse en el espejo tras un minuto de ensayo, pasó a ejercitar el cambio de voz y de maneras. Ésta era la única parte del personaje en el que había sido posible, con sus peculiaridades físicas, imitar a la señorita Garth, y ahí la semejanza era perfecta. La voz áspera, las maneras bruscas, la costumbre de acompañar ciertas frases con una enfática inclinación de cabeza, la pronunciación gutural del norte que se manifestaba en todas las palabras que contenían la letra «erre», todas estas características personales de la vieja institutriz del norte se vieron fielmente retratadas. La transformación personal así conseguida era literalmente lo que el capitán Wragge había predicho: un triunfo en el arte del disfraz. Salvo en el caso de que su rostro fuera expuesto a una luz intensa, nadie sospecharía un solo instante mirando a Magdalen que no era una mujer enferma, contrahecha y poco agraciada de cincuenta años por lo menos.

Antes de abrir la puerta hizo una atenta inspección para cerciorarse de que no había dejado a la vista ningún material utilizado por si la patrona entraba en la habitación en su ausencia. El único objeto olvidado que le pertenecía era un pequeño paquete formado por las cartas de Norah que había estado leyendo durante la noche y que accidentalmente había quedado debajo del espejo mientras se vestía. Cuando cogió las cartas para guardarlas se le ocurrió la idea por primera vez. ¿Me reconocería Norah si nos encontráramos ahora en la calle? Se miró en el espejo y sonrió con tristeza.

- No -dijo-. Ni siquiera Norah.

Abrió la puerta después de mirar el reloj. Eran cerca de las doce. Apenas le quedaba una hora para probar su desesperado experimento y regresar a sus habitaciones antes de que los hijos de la patrona volvieran de la escuela.

Se detuvo a escuchar un momento en el descansillo para asegurarse de que todo estaba en silencio en el pasillo de abajo. Bajó las escaleras sin hacer ruido y llegó a la calle sin haber tropezado en la casa con ninguna criatura viviente. Poco después había cruzado la calle y llamaba a la puerta de Noel Vanstone.

Le abrió la puerta la misma criada a la que había seguido hasta la papelería la tarde del día anterior. Con un temblor momentáneo que recordaba la primera y memorable noche de su aparición en público, Magdalen preguntó (con la voz y las maneras de la señorita Garth) por la señora Lecount.

- La señora Lecount ha salido, señora -dijo la criada.

- ¿Está en casa el señor Vanstone? -preguntó Magdalen, cuya resolución se impuso de nuevo inmediatamente ante el primer obstáculo que se le oponía.

- Mi amo aún no se ha levantado, señora.

¡Un nuevo contratiempo! Un carácter más débil hubiera aceptado el aviso. El carácter de Magdalen se rebeló contra él.

- ¿A qué hora volverá la señora Lecount? -preguntó.

- Hacia la una, señora.

- Dígale, por favor, que volveré lo antes posible a partir de la una. Estoy especialmente interesada en ver a la señora Lecount. Yo soy la señorita Garth.

Dio media vuelta y se fue. No podía ni pensar en volver a su habitación; la criada (como sabía Magdalen porque no había oído que se cerrara la puerta) la observaba; además, se exponía, si volvía a entrar, a salir exactamente a la hora en que los hijos de la patrona estarían en casa con toda seguridad. Giró a la derecha sin pensar, caminó hasta llegar al puente de Vauxhall y aguardó allí contemplando el río.

El intervalo de tiempo que tenía ante sí alcanzaba casi la hora. ¿En qué podía ocuparla?

Al plantearse esta duda, volvió a surgir la idea que le había venido a la cabeza cuando guardaba el paquete de cartas de Norah. Sintió un súbito impulso de poner a prueba la desagradable perfección de su disfraz, mezclado con los sentimientos más puros y elevados de su corazón, y aumentó su natural ansiedad por ver de nuevo el rostro de su hermana, aunque no se atreviera a descubrirse a sí misma y hablarle. Las últimas cartas de Norah describían con todo detalle su vida como institutriz, sus horas de clase, sus horas de ocio, sus horas de salir a pasear con sus pupilas. Magdalen tenía el tiempo justo, si encontraba un vehículo en ese mismo momento, para ir a la casa en que trabajaba Norah y llegar unos minutos antes de la hora en que tenía que salir. «¡Una mirada me dirá más que cien cartas!» Con esa idea en el corazón, con el propósito de seguir a Norah en su paseo diario bajo la protección del disfraz, Magdalen se apresuró a cruzar el puente en dirección a la orilla norte del río.

De este modo, en el punto crucial de su vida; de este modo, en el intervalo que precedía a dar el paso irrevocable y trasponer el umbral de la casa de Noel Vanstone, las fuerzas del Bien triunfaron en la lucha que sostenían por ella contra las fuerzas del Mal y le hicieron dar la espalda al escenario de su meditado engaño, alejándola misericordiosamente cada vez más de la fatídica casa.

Detuvo el primer coche de punto desocupado que pasó, indicó al cochero que se dirigiera a New Street, Spring Gardens, y prometió doblar el precio del trayecto si llegaba a su destino a una hora determinada. El hombre se ganó el dinero; de hecho, se lo ganó con creces. Magdalen no había dado ni diez pasos por New Street caminando en dirección a St. James's Park cuando se abrió la puerta de una casa situada más adelante y salió por ella una señorita vestida de luto acompañada de dos niñas. La señorita tomó también la dirección del parque sin volver la cabeza hacia Magdalen mientras bajaba los escalones de entrada a la casa. Poco importaba, el corazón de Magdalen miró a través de sus ojos y le dijo que estaba viendo a Norah.

Las siguió al interior de St. James's Park, y desde allí (a lo largo del paseo) hasta Green Park, aventurándose a acercarse más cuando llegaron a la pradera y subieron por la pendiente en dirección a Hyde Park Comer. Los ávidos ojos de Magdalen devoraron el vestido de Norah hasta sus más mínimos detalles y detectaron los más leves cambios sufridos por su figura y su porte. Norah había adelgazado desde el otoño; caminaba con paso cansino y la cabeza un poco gacha. El traje de luto, que llevaba con la modesta gracia y la pulcritud que ninguna desgracia podía arrebatarle, se adecuaba a su cambio de posición social; el vestido negro era de paño; el chal y el sombrero negros eran del tipo más barato y sencillo. Las dos niñas que caminaban a ambos lados de su hermana llevaban vestidos de seda. Magdalen las odió instintivamente.

Dio un amplio rodeo por la hierba para girar progresivamente y encontrarse con su hermana sin despertar la sospecha de que el encuentro era intencionado. El corazón le latía con fuerza; un súbito acaloramiento se adueñó de ella cuando pensó en sus cabellos postizos, en su falso cutis y en su falso atuendo al ver el querido rostro familiar acercándose cada vez más. Pasaron una junto a la otra. Los amables ojos oscuros de Norah se alzaron con una luz más honda, con una belleza más triste que en otros tiempos -se posaron sobre el rostro de su hermana ignorantes de la verdad- y se apartaron de nuevo como del rostro de una extraña. Esa mirada de un instante conmovió a Magdalen en lo más profundo de su corazón. Se quedó clavada en el sitio

después de que pasara Norah. Se apoderó de ella, de su cuerpo y de su alma, el horror del vil disfraz que la ocultaba, el anhelo de romper sus trabas y cobijar su vergonzoso rostro pintado en el pecho de Norah. Se dio la vuelta y miró hacia atrás.

Norah y las dos niñas habían llegado al terreno más alto y se acercaban a una de las entradas de la verja de hierro que circundaba el parque separándolo de la calle. Atraída por una irresistible fascinación, Magdalen las siguió de nuevo, las alcanzó cuando llegaban a la salida y oyó las voces de las dos niñas discutiendo airadamente por dónde querían seguir paseando. Vio que Norah las obligaba a salir por la puerta y que luego se agachaba y les hablaba mientras esperaban la ocasión de cruzar la calle. Sus palabras sólo consiguieron que chillaran más y con mayor fiereza. La más pequeña -una niña de ocho o nueve años de edad- tuvo una acalorada rabieta infantil, gritó, chilló e incluso dio algún puntapié a la institutriz. Los transeúntes se detuvieron y se echaron a reír; algunos de ellos aconsejaron en broma un pequeño y saludable correctivo; una mujer preguntó a Norah si era la madre de la criatura; otra la compadeció en voz alta por ser la institutriz de la niña. Antes de que Magdalen pudiera abrirse paso entre la multitud -antes de que una irrefrenable impaciencia por ayudar a su hermana cerrara sus ojos a cualquier otra consideración y la llevara al lado de Norah, delatándose a sí misma- cruzó con lentitud un carruaje abierto, obstaculizado por los vehículos que circulaban delante. La anciana señora que lo ocupaba oyó los gritos de la niña, reconoció a Norah y la llamó de inmediato. El lacayo apartó a la multitud e instaló a las niñas en el carruaje.

- Es una suerte que pasara casualmente por aquí -dijo la anciana señora, indicando a Norah con un despectivo ademán que ocupara su lugar en el asiento delantero-. Nunca ha podido dominar a las hijas de mi hija y nunca lo conseguirá. -El lacayo subió la escala, el carruaje se alejó con las niñas y la institutriz, la multitud se dispersó y Magdalen volvió a quedarse sola.

«¡Mejor! -pensó con amargura-. Sólo habría conseguido turbarla. Sólo habría servido para que sufriéramos de nuevo el dolor de separarnos.»

Volvió sobre sus pasos como una autómata; regresó como en un sueño al espacio abierto del parque. Armándose traicioneramente con la fuerza del amor que profesaba a su hermana, con la vehemencia de la indignación que sentía por su causa, la terrible tentación de su vida hizo presa en ella con mayor fuerza que nunca. Bajo la pintura y el disfraz que la desfiguraban, la violenta desesperación de aquel carácter fuerte y apasionado le dio un aspecto horrible y macilento. Norah convertida en objeto de diversión y curiosidad públicas; Norah reprendida en plena calle; Norah víctima a sueldo de la insolencia de una vieja y del mal genio de una niña; ¡y tenía que agradecérselo al mismo hombre que había enviado a Frank a la China!, ¡y al hijo de ese hombre después de él! La imagen de su hermana, que la había alejado del escenario del engaño que planeaba, que le había hecho odiosa la conciencia de su disfraz, fue entonces la imagen que sancionó ese método o cualquier otro para lograr sus fines, la imagen que dio alas a sus pies y la hizo regresar a toda prisa a la fatídica casa.

Salió de nuevo del parque y se encontró en la calle sin saber dónde estaba. Una vez más detuvo el primer coche de punto que pasó e indicó al cochero que la llevara a Vauxhall Walk.

El cambio de caminar a ir en coche sirvió para sosegarla. Su atención se volvió hacia sí misma y su atuendo. La necesidad de cerciorarse de que su disfraz no había sufrido ningún percance se hizo patente de inmediato. Pidió al cochero que se detuviera en la primera pastelería por la que pasaron y allí consiguió mirarse en un espejo antes de arriesgarse a probar suerte de nuevo en Vauxhall Walk.

La peluca gris tenía el pelo revuelto y el anticuado sombrero se había ladeado un poco. Eso era todo. Arregló los escasos defectos del disfraz y regresó al coche. Era la una y media cuando se acercó a la casa y llamó por segunda vez a la puerta de Noel Vanstone. Le abrió la misma criada de la primera vez.

- ¿Ha vuelto la señora Lecount?

- Sí, señora. Pase por aquí, por favor.

La criada precedió a Magdalen a lo largo de un corredor vacío y, tras pasar junto a una escalinata sin alfombra, abrió la puerta de una habitación de la parte posterior de la casa. La luz entraba en la habitación por una ventana que daba a un jardín, las paredes estaban desnudas, igual que el suelo de tablas. Había dos sillas de dormitorio contra la pared y una mesa de cocina bajo la ventana. Sobre la mesa vio un tanque de cristal lleno de agua, adornado en el centro por una pirámide en miniatura de rocas mezcladas con algas. A los lados del tanque se aferraban unos caracoles; renacuajos y peces diminutos nadaban veloces en el agua verde; escurridizos tritones y ranas viscosas entrelazaban sus caminos entrando y saliendo de la pirámide de rocas y algas; y en lo más alto de la pirámide, solitario, frío como la piedra, pardo como la piedra, inerte como la piedra, se hallaba sentado un pequeño sapo de ojos brillantes. El arte de cuidar peces y reptiles como mascotas domésticas no se había popularizado en Inglaterra en aquella época y al entrar en la habitación Magdalen retrocedió con asombro y repugnancia irreprimibles ante el primer ejemplar de acuario que veía en su vida.

- No se alarme -dijo una voz de mujer a su espalda-. Mis mascotas no hacen daño a nadie.

Magdalen se volvió y se encontró cara a cara con la señora Lecount. Basándose en la carta que el ama de llaves le había escrito, Magdalen esperaba ver una vieja adusta, taimada, desagradable e insolente. Lo que halló, en cambio, fue una señora de modales suaves y zalameros, cuyo atuendo era personificación de la pulcritud, el buen gusto y la simplicidad de una matrona, y cuyo aspecto personal era poco menos que un triunfo de la resistencia física a la devastadora influencia del tiempo. Si la señora Lecount se hubiera quitado unos quince o dieciséis años y hubiera afirmado tener treinta y ocho, no habría habido un hombre entre un millar ni una mujer entre cien que hubiera dudado de su palabra. Sus cabellos negros apenas empezaban a teñirse de gris. Los llevaba divididos por la mitad bajo una cofia de encaje inmaculada, escasamente adornada con lazos de luto. Ni una sola arruga se mostraba en su lisa y blanca frente ni en sus mejillas blancas y mofletudas. Se le formaban hoyuelos en la papada y sus dientes eran una maravilla de blancura y regularidad. Se hubieran podido criticar sus labios por su excesiva finura, de no ser porque estaban acostumbrados a sacar partido a sus defectos gracias a una sonrisa suplicante y persuasiva. Sus grandes ojos negros habrían parecido feroces en el rostro de otra mujer; eran afables y enternecedores en el rostro de la señora Lecount. Se interesaban con afecto por todo lo que miraban: por Magdalen; por el sapo de la pirámide de roca; por la vista del jardín posterior desde la ventana; por sus propias manos, blancas y gordezuelas, que se frotaba suavemente mientras hablaba; por su bonita pechera de batista, que tenía la costumbre de contemplar con complacencia mientras escuchaba a los demás. El elegante traje negro con que vestía de luto la memoria de Michael Vanstone no era sólo un vestido, era un bello cumplido a la Muerte. Su inocente delantal de blanca muselina era por sí solo un pequeño poema doméstico. Sus pendientes de azabache eran tan modestos en sus pretensiones que un cuáquero podría haberlos mirado sin cometer pecado alguno. La atractiva redondez de su rostro se correspondía con las atractivas redondeces de su figura, que se deslizaba suavemente al andar, fluyendo en sosegadas ondulaciones. Pocos hombres podrían haber contemplado a la señora Lecount desde un estricto punto de vista platónico; muchachos adolescentes la habrían encontrado irresistible; las mujeres no habrían podido sino endurecer su opinión sobre ella y penetrar a la fuerza, sin piedad, en su interior a través de aquella atractiva y sonriente superficie. El primer vistazo de Magdalen a aquella Venus en el otoño de su feminidad la convenció por completo de que había hecho bien en tantear el terreno disfrazada antes de arriesgarse a medirse con la señora Lecount.

- ¿Tengo el placer de dirigirme a la señora que ha venido esta mañana? -preguntó el ama de llaves-. ¿Estoy hablando con la señorita Garth?

Hubo algo en la expresión de sus ojos cuando hizo esa pregunta que aconsejó a Magdalen apartar aún más el rostro de la ventana. La simple duda de que el ama de

llaves pudiera haberla visto ya bajo una luz demasiado intensa hizo que perdiera por un momento su sangre fría. Esperó a recobrarla limitándose a asentir.

- Acepte mis disculpas, señora, por el lugar en el que me veo obligada a recibirla -prosiguió la señora Lecount en un inglés fluido con acento extranjero-. El señor Vanstone reside aquí de forma temporal. Nos vamos a la costa mañana por la tarde y no se ha considerado necesario arreglar la casa como es debido para tan poco tiempo. ¿Sería tan amable de tomar asiento y comunicarme el objeto de su visita?

Imperceptiblemente avanzó un par de pasos hacia Magdalen y colocó una silla para ella justo delante de la ventana.

- Siéntese, se lo ruego -dijo la señora Lecount, observando con el mayor interés los ojos inflamados de la visitante a través del velo.

- Como puede ver usted misma, padezco una enfermedad en los ojos -dijo Magdalen, manteniendo siempre el perfil hacia la ventana y modulando cuidadosamente su voz para adoptar el tono de la señorita Garth-. He de rogarle que me permita tener el velo bajado y sentarme lejos de la luz. -Pronunció estas palabras sintiéndose de nuevo dueña de sí misma. Con absoluto aplomo devolvió la silla al rincón de la estancia, alejándola de la ventana, y se sentó en ella procurando que la sombra del sombrero cubriera siempre su rostro. Los labios persuasivos de la señora Lecount murmuraron una cortés expresión de simpatía; los amigables ojos negros de la señora Lecount miraron a la desconocida con mayor interés que nunca. Colocó una silla alineada con la de Magdalen y se sentó tan cerca de la pared que obligaba a la visitante a volver la cabeza un poco hacia la ventana, o a mostrarse descortés por no mirar a la persona a la que se dirigía.

- Sí -dijo la señora Lecount tras una breve tos que denotaba confianza-. ¿Y a qué circunstancias debo el honor de su visita?

- ¿Me permite preguntarle primero si mi nombre le resulta familiar? -dijo Magdalen, obligada a volverse hacia ella, pero al mismo tiempo con la frialdad de mantener el pañuelo entre su rostro y la luz de la ventana.

- No -respondió la señora Lecount, después de emitir de nuevo una tosecilla, bastante más seca que la primera-. El nombre de señorita Garth no me es familiar.

- En ese caso -prosiguió Magdalen-, comprenderá mejor el motivo de esta intrusión si le explico quién soy. Viví durante muchos años, como institutriz, en la familia del difunto señor Andrew Vanstone, de Combe-Raven, y he venido aquí en interés de sus hijas huérfanas.

Las manos de la señora Lecount, que no habían dejado de deslizarse una sobre otra hasta ese momento, se detuvieron de repente, y sus labios, olvidando cerrarse, confesaron ser demasiado finos en el inicio mismo de la entrevista.

- Me sorprende que pueda soportar la luz del sol sin gafas ahumadas -comentó tranquilamente, pasando por alto la presentación de la falsa señorita Garth como si no la hubiera oído.

- Creo que dan demasiado calor a los ojos en esta época del año -replicó Magdalen, rivalizando con el ama de llaves en aplomo-. ¿Puedo preguntarle si ha oído lo que acabo de decirle sobre el propósito de mi venida a esta casa?

- ¿Puedo preguntar a mi vez, señora, qué puede tener que ver conmigo ese propósito? -preguntó la señora Lecount.

- Por supuesto -dijo Magdalen-. He venido a verla porque el señor Noel Vanstone hizo saber sus intenciones con respecto a las dos señoritas mediante una carta escrita por usted.

Esta clara respuesta tuvo su efecto. Advirtió a la señora Lecount que la desconocida estaba mejor informada de lo que había sospechado en un principio y que en esas

circunstancias no sería sensato negarse a escucharla.

- Le ruego que me perdone -dijo el ama de llaves-. No lo había entendido bien; ahora lo entiendo perfectamente. Se equivoca usted, señora, al suponer que yo tengo poder alguno, o que ejerzo alguna influencia en este lamentable asunto. Soy la portavoz del señor Noel Vanstone; la pluma que él sostiene, si me permite la expresión, nada más. Él es un enfermo y, como todos los enfermos, tiene sus días buenos y sus días malos. Era uno de los malos el día en que respondió a la joven... ¿puedo llamarla señorita Vanstone? Lo haré con sumo gusto, pobrecilla, pues, ¿quién soy yo para hacer distinciones, y qué me importa a mí que sus padres estuvieran casados o no? Como le decía, era uno de los días malos del señor Noel Vanstone cuando se envió esa carta, y por tanto tuve que escribirla, simplemente como secretaria suya, a falta de otra mejor. Si desea hablar del tema de esas dos señoritas... ¿puedo llamarlas simplemente señoritas como acaba de hacer usted? No, pobrecillas, las llamaré señoritas Vanstone. Si desea hablar sobre el tema de las señoritas Vanstone, transmitiré al señor Noel Vanstone su nombre y el propósito de la visita con la que me ha honrado. Se encuentra solo en el gabinete y hoy es uno de sus días buenos. Tengo sobre él la influencia de muchos años a su servicio y la usaré con placer en favor de usted. Si me lo permite iré ahora mismo -dijo la señora Lecount, levantándose con una afabilísima impaciencia por ser de utilidad.

- Como guste -contestó Magdalen-, si no es molestia. No quisiera abusar de su amabilidad.

- Al contrario -replicó la señora Lecount-, le estoy muy agradecida; usted me va a permitir que contribuya, a mi modesto modo, a realizar un acto de buena voluntad. -Se inclinó, sonrió y salió de la habitación con sus suaves andares.

Una vez a solas, Magdalen dejó que se desatara la ira que había contenido en presencia de la señora Lecount. A falta de un objeto más noble para su ataque, lo dirigió al sapo. La visión de aquel horrible y pequeño reptil, plácidamente sentado en su trono de rocas, con sus brillantes ojos clavando una mirada impenetrable en el vacío, la irritó sobremanera. Contempló la criatura con intenso odio y le susurró malévolamente entre dientes:

- Me gustaría saber quién tiene más sangre fría, tú, pequeño monstruo, o la señora Lecount. Me gustaría saber si tu lomo es tan viscoso como rastrero es el corazón de la señora Lecount. Engendro odioso, ¿sabes lo que es tu dueña? ¡Tu dueña es un demonio!

La piel moteada que tenía el sapo debajo de la boca se arrugó misteriosamente, luego volvió a expandirse despacio como si se hubiera tragado las palabras que acababan de dirigirle. Magdalen dio un respingo de repugnancia ante el primer movimiento perceptible del cuerpo de la criatura, pese a su insignificancia, y regresó a su silla. Hizo bien en volver a sentarse inmediatamente. La puerta se abrió sin hacer ruido y apareció de nuevo la señora Lecount.

- El señor Vanstone la recibirá -dijo-, si es usted tan amable de esperar unos minutos. Hará sonar la campanilla del gabinete cuando dé por concluida su actual ocupación y esté dispuesto para verla a usted. Tenga cuidado, señora, de no deprimirlo ni perturbarlo en modo alguno. Su corazón ha sido motivo de grave inquietud para cuantos le rodeaban desde su infancia. No padece ninguna enfermedad concreta, tan sólo una debilidad crónica, una degeneración adiposa, una falta de poder vital en el órgano mismo. Su corazón seguirá funcionando si no le obliga a trabajar demasiado; ése es el consejo de todos los médicos que lo han visto. No lo olvide y vigile por tanto su conversación. Hablando de médicos, ¿ha probado el ungüento amarillo para esa dolorosa afección de los ojos? Según me han comentado es un excelente remedio.

- No ha tenido éxito en mi caso -contestó Magdalen con aspereza-. Antes de ver al señor Noel Vanstone -continuó-, ¿podría preguntarle...?

- Perdóneme -le interrumpió la señora Lecount-. ¿Se refiere su pregunta en modo alguno a esas dos pobres muchachas?

- Se refiere a las señoritas Vanstone.

- Entonces no puedo contestarle. Perdone, pero realmente me es imposible hablar de esas pobres muchachas (¡me alegra tanto oírle llamarlas señoritas Vanstone!) si no es en presencia de mi señor y con su permiso expreso. Hablemos de otra cosa mientras esperamos aquí. ¿Se ha fijado en mi tanque de cristal? Tengo motivos para creer que es una auténtica novedad en Inglaterra.

- Lo he observado mientras usted estaba fuera -dijo Magdalen.

- ¿Sí? ¿Tal vez no le interesa el tema? Es muy natural. Tampoco a mí me interesaba hasta que me casé. Mi querido marido, que murió hace muchos años, moldeó mis gustos y me elevó a su nivel. ¿Ha oído usted hablar del difunto profesor Lecomte, el eminente naturalista suizo? Yo soy su viuda. En el círculo inglés de Zurich (en el que me desenvolvía al servicio de mi difunto señor) anglicanizaron mi apellido, cambiándolo por Lecount. Sus generosos compatriotas no admiten nada extranjero entre ellos si pueden evitarlo, ni siquiera un apellido. Pero le estaba hablando de mi marido, mi querido marido, que me permitió ayudarle en su profesión. Sólo una cosa me ha interesado desde su muerte: la ciencia. Eminente en muchos campos, el profesor sobresalía en el de los reptiles. Me dejó los objetos de sus estudios y su tanque. No tuve otra herencia. Ahí está el tanque. Todos los especímenes murieron menos ese tranquilo y pequeño individuo, ese bonito sapo. ¿Le sorprende que me guste? No hay razón para sorprenderse. El profesor vivió el tiempo suficiente para elevarme por encima de los prejuicios comunes contra la creación reptil. Debidamente considerada, la creación reptil es hermosa. Debidamente diseccionada, la creación reptil es sumamente instructiva. -Extendió un dedo meñique y acarició suavemente el dorso del sapo con la punta-. Tan refrescante al tacto -dijo la señora Lecount-. ¡Tan agradable y fresca en verano!

Sonó la campanilla del gabinete. La señora Lecount se levantó, se inclinó con cariño sobre el acuario y se despidió del sapo con unos gorjeos como si fuera un pájaro.

- El señor Vanstone la recibirá ahora. Sígame, se lo ruego, señorita Garth. -Abrió la puerta al tiempo que hablaba y salió precediendo a Magdalen.

CAPÍTULO III

- La señorita Garth, señor -dijo la señora Lecount abriendo la puerta del gabinete y anunciando a la visitante con el tono y las maneras de una sirvienta bien educada.

Magdalen se encontró en una habitación larga y estrecha consistente en dos gabinetes convertidos en uno por el procedimiento de abrir la puerta de fuelle que los separaba. Sentado no muy lejos de la ventana más cercana, de espaldas a la luz, vio a un hombre menudo y frágil, de cabellos rubios y con aire de suficiencia, con un elegante batín blanco excesivamente grande para él y un ramillete de violetas que adornaba pulcramente el ojal de la solapa. Parecía tener una edad comprendida entre los treinta y los treinta y cinco años. Su cutis era tan delicado como el de una muchacha, sus ojos del azul más claro; un bigotito blanco y ralo adornaba su labio superior, de puntas enceradas y retorcidas para formar sendas espirales finísimas. Cuando un objeto atraía especialmente su atención, entrecerraba los párpados para mirarlo. Cuando sonreía, la piel de las sienes se le convertía en un nido de pequeñas arrugas maliciosas. Tenía un plato de fresas en el regazo, con una servilleta debajo para proteger la pureza de su batín blanco. A su derecha había una gran mesa redonda cubierta por una colección de curiosidades extranjeras que parecían proceder de los cuatro confines del globo. Aves disecadas de África, monstruos de porcelana de la China, adornos y utensilios de plata de la India y Perú, piezas de mosaico de Italia y bronces de Francia se amontonaban en confuso desorden con las burdas cajas y los sucios estuches de piel que habían servido para empaquetarlos. El hombrecillo se disculpó con vanidad alegre y afectada por el desorden de sus curiosidades, por su batín y su salud delicada, y señalando una silla con la mano, dedicó toda su atención a la visitante con cortesía pragmática. Magdalen lo miró preguntándose por un momento si la señora Lecount la había engañado. ¿Aquél era el hombre que seguía despiadadamente el ejemplo de su despiadado padre? Le costaba creerlo.

- Tome asiento, señorita Garth -repitió él, observando su vacilación y anunciando su propio nombre con voz aguda, débil e irritante por su suficiencia-. Soy el señor Noel Vanstone. Quería usted verme, ¡aquí estoy!

- ¿Me permite que me retire, señor? -preguntó la señora Lecount.

- ¡Por supuesto que no! -respondió su amo-. Quédese, Lecount, y háganos compañía. La señora Lecount goza de mi total confianza -continuó, dirigiéndose a Magdalen-. Lo que tenga que decirme, señora, puede decírselo a ella. Es un tesoro de virtudes domésticas. No hay casa en Inglaterra que tenga un tesoro como la señora Lecount.

El ama de llaves escuchó las alabanzas de sus virtudes domésticas con la vista fija en su elegante pechera. Pero la sagaz Magdalen había detectado previamente una mirada entre la señora Lecount y su amo que sugería que Noel Vanstone había sido instruido de antemano sobre lo que debía decir y hacer en presencia de la visitante. Esta sospecha -y los obstáculos que presentaba la habitación para colocarse de modo que la luz no le diera sobre la cara- aconsejó a Magdalen que debía mantener la guardia.

En un principio había colocado su silla casi en el centro de la habitación. Un instante de reflexión la indujo a mover su asiento hacia la izquierda para situarse muy cerca y de espaldas a la jamba izquierda de la puerta de fuelle. En esa posición bloqueaba diestramente el único paso por el que la señora Lecount podría haber rodeado la gran mesa, consiguiendo así hallarse cara a cara con Magdalen si colocaba la silla junto a su amo. A la derecha de la mesa, el espacio lo ocupaban completamente la chimenea y el guardafuegos, unas cuantas maletas y una gran caja de embalaje. A la señora Lecount no le quedó más remedio que colocarse a la altura de Magdalen, de espaldas a la jamba derecha de la puerta de fuelle, para no cometer la grosería de hacer a un lado a la visitante con la intención obvia de sentarse frente a ella. Tras una expresiva tosecilla y una firme mirada a su amo, el ama de llaves se rindió y fue a sentarse de espaldas a la jamba derecha de la puerta. «Espere un poco -pensó la señora Lecount-, ¡después me

tocará a mí!»

- ¡Cuidado con lo que toca, señora! -exclamó Noel Vanstone, cuando Magdalen se acercó accidentalmente a la mesa al mover su silla-. ¡Cuidado con la manga! Disculpe, pero ha estado a punto de tirar esa palmatoria. Por favor, no crea que se trata de una palmatoria vulgar. Nada de eso, es una palmatoria peruana. En todo el mundo sólo hay tres iguales. Una está en poder del presidente del Perú, la otra está guardada en el Vaticano y la última se halla sobre mi mesa. Costó diez libras, vale cincuenta. Una de las gangas de mi padre, señora. Todas estas cosas son gangas que adquirió mi padre. No hay otra casa en toda Inglaterra que tenga curiosidades como éstas. Siéntese, Lecount; póngase cómoda por favor. La señora Lecount es otro objeto curioso, señorita Garth; es una de las gangas de mi padre. Es usted una de las gangas de mi padre, ¿no es verdad, Lecount? Mi padre era un hombre extraordinario, señora. Su recuerdo está presente en toda la casa. En este momento llevo puesto su batín. Ya no se hace un hilo como éste, no lo conseguiría ni pagando una fortuna. ¿Quiere palpar la textura? Tal vez no pueda usted juzgarla. Tal vez preferiría hablarme de esas dos pupilas suyas. Son dos, ¿no? ¿Son chicas guapas?, ¿bellezas inglesas, frescas, bien desarrolladas y regordetas?

- Disculpe, señor -intervino la señora Lecount con tono pesaroso-. Tendré que rogarle que me permita retirarme si habla de ese modo de las pobrecillas. No puedo quedarme aquí sentada oyendo cómo las ridiculiza. Piense en su situación; piense en la señorita Garth.

- ¡Bondadosa criatura! -dijo Noel Vanstone, observando al ama de llaves a través de los ojos semiabiertos-. ¡Qué excelente persona es usted, Lecount! Le aseguro, señora, que la señora Lecount es una magnífica persona. Habrá observado que siente lástima por las dos chicas. Yo no llego a tanto, pero puedo ser indulgente con ellas y con usted. - Sonrió con la cortesía más cordial y cogió una fresa del plato de su regazo.

- Escandaliza usted a la señorita Garth; le aseguro, señor, que sin pretenderlo escandaliza a la señorita Garth -protestó la señora Lecount-. Ella no está acostumbrada a usted como yo. Piense en la señorita Garth, señor. Hágame ese favor y piense en la señorita Garth.

Hasta aquí Magdalen se había mantenido en su determinación de guardar silencio. De haberla dejado aflorar a la superficie, la ira abrasadora la hubiera delatado en un instante; pero hacía latir su corazón desaforadamente y le aconsejaba, mientras hablaba Noel Vanstone, que sellara sus labios. Le hubiera dejado hablar unos minutos más sin interrupción de no haber sido porque la señora Lecount se interpuso por segunda vez. La refinada insolencia compasiva del ama de llaves era típicamente femenina e incitó a Magdalen a dominarse en el acto. Jamás había imitado la voz y las maneras de la señorita Garth de forma tan admirable como cuando pronunció sus siguientes palabras.

- Es usted muy amable -dijo a la señora Lecount-. No pretendo ser tratada con especial consideración. Soy una institutriz; no espero tal cosa. Sólo quiero pedir un favor. Ruego al señor Noel Vanstone que escuche lo que tengo que decirle por su propio bien.

- ¿Lo ha entendido, señor? -señaló la señora Lecount-. Al parecer la señorita Garth tiene que hacerle una seria advertencia. Dice que debe escucharla por su propio bien.

El claro cutis del señor Noel Vanstone palideció. Dejó el plato de fresas entre las gangas de su padre. Le temblaba la mano y su figura menuda se retorcía con inquietud en la silla. Magdalen lo observó atentamente. «Ya he descubierto algo -pensó-, ¡es un cobarde!»

- ¿Qué quiere usted decir, señora? -preguntó Noel Vanstone con visible agitación-. ¿Qué pretende diciéndome que debo escucharla por mi propio bien? Si ha venido para intimidarme, se ha equivocado de hombre. La firmeza de mi carácter era conocida por todos en nuestro círculo de Zurich, ¿no es cierto, Lecount?

- Por todos, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. Pero oigamos a la señorita Garth. Tal vez yo haya interpretado mal sus palabras.

- Al contrario -replicó Magdalen-, ha expresado exactamente lo que quería decir. Mi propósito al venir aquí es advertir al señor Noel Vanstone de que no siga por el camino que ha tomado.

- ¡No siga! -suplicó la señora Lecount-. ¡Oh, si realmente quiere ayudar a esas pobres muchachas, no hable de esa forma! ¡Aplaque su resolución mediante ruegos, señora, no la refuerce con amenazas! -El ama de llaves forzó un poco el tono de humildad con que dijo estas palabras, exageró un poco la expresión de reparo con que las acompañó. Si Magdalen no hubiera visto ya perfectamente que era una práctica habitual de la señora Lecount tomar de antemano las decisiones pertinentes a su amo para persuadirle luego de que no actuaba bajo sus dictados, sino bajo los propios, lo habría comprendido en aquel momento.

- ¿Ha oído lo que acaba de decir Lecount? -señaló Noel Vanstone-. ¿Ha oído el testimonio espontáneo de una persona que me conoce desde la infancia? Tenga cuidado, señorita Garth, ¡tenga cuidado!. -Satisfecho de sí mismo, alisó los faldones de su blanco batín sobre las rodillas y volvió a colocar el plato de fresas sobre su regazo.

- No es mi intención ofenderle -dijo Magdalen-. Mi único anhelo es abrirle los ojos a la verdad. Usted no conoce el carácter de las dos hermanas cuyas fortunas han caído en sus manos. Yo las conozco desde la infancia y he venido para ofrecerle las ventajas de mi experiencia en beneficio tanto de ellas como suyo. No tiene nada que temer de la mayor; acepta con resignación la suerte cruel que usted y su padre, antes que usted, le han impuesto. La conducta de la hermana menor es totalmente opuesta. Se ha negado ya a someterse a la decisión del padre de usted y se niega ahora a que la carta de la señora Lecount acalle su voz. Créame, es capaz de causarle serios trastornos si persiste en convertirla en enemiga.

Noel Vanstone mudó de color una vez más y de nuevo empezó a retorcerse en su silla.

- Serios trastornos -repitió con mirada inexpresiva-. Si se refiere a escribir cartas, señora, ya nos ha causado bastantes molestias. A mí me ha escrito una vez y dos veces a mi padre. Una de las que recibió él era una carta amenazadora, ¿no es cierto, Lecount?

- Expresaba sus sentimientos, pobrecilla -dijo la señora Lecount-. A mí me pareció cruel devolverle la carta, pero su querido padre era de distinta opinión. Lo que yo dije entonces fue: ¿por qué no dejarle expresar sus sentimientos? ¿Qué son unas cuantas palabras amenazadoras, al fin y al cabo? En su situación, pobre criatura... Son sólo palabras y nada más.

- Le aconsejo que no esté tan segura -dijo Magdalen-. Yo la conozco mejor que usted.

Hizo una pausa tras estas palabras, una pausa motivada por un terror momentáneo. El aguijón de la conmiseración de la señora Lecount le había irritado tanto que a punto había estado de olvidar su personaje para hablar con su propia voz.

- Se ha referido usted a las cartas escritas por mi pupila -prosiguió, dirigiéndose a Noel Vanstone, tan pronto como volvió a sentirse segura de sí misma-. No diremos nada sobre lo que escribió a su padre, tan sólo hablaremos de lo que le ha escrito a usted. ¿Hay algo impropio en su carta, alguna cosa que sea falsa? ¿No es cierto que las dos hermanas han sido cruelmente despojadas de la herencia paterna? El testamento del padre de esas señoritas habla por él y por ellas hasta el día de hoy, y únicamente habla en vano porque él ignoraba que su matrimonio le obligaba a volver a redactarlo y porque murió antes de poder remediar su error. ¿Lo niega usted?

Noel Vanstone sonrió y cogió una fresa.

- No es mi intención -dijo-. Siga, señorita Garth.

- ¿No es cierto -insistió Magdalen- que la ley que ha arrebatado el dinero a esas hermanas, cuyo padre no hizo un segundo testamento, le ha entregado ahora ese mismo dinero a usted, cuyo padre no hizo ningún testamento en absoluto? Lo mire por donde lo mire, no me negará que es una crueldad para esas jóvenes huérfanas.

- Una crueldad sin duda -replicó Noel Vanstone-. A usted también se lo parece, ¿no es verdad, Lecount?

La señora Lecount meneó la cabeza y cerró sus hermosos ojos negros.

- Desgarradora -dijo-. No tengo otra palabra para describirlo, señorita Garth. Desgarradora. Lo que no acierto a comprender es cómo descubrió esa joven... ¡no!, cómo descubrió la joven señorita Vanstone que mi difunto y respetado amo no hizo testamento. ¿Salió quizá en los periódicos? Pero la estoy interrumpiendo, señorita Garth. ¿Tiene algo más que decir sobre la carta de su pupila? -El ama de llaves movió su silla hacia delante con estrépito mientras pronunciaba esas palabras, unos centímetros por delante de la silla de la visita. Fue un buen intento, pero resultó infructuoso. Magdalen se limitó a mantener la cabeza más hacia la izquierda y la caja de embalaje del suelo impedía a la señora Lecount avanzar más.

- Sólo tengo una pregunta más que hacerle -dijo Magdalen-. La carta de mi pupila contenía una proposición dirigida al señor Noel Vanstone. Le ruego que me informe de por qué se ha negado a considerarla.

- ¡Mi buena señora! -exclamó Noel Vanstone, arqueando sus blancas cejas con asombro satírico-. ¿Habla en serio? ¿Sabe cuál es esa proposición? ¿Ha leído la carta?

- Hablo muy en serio -dijo Magdalen-, y he leído la carta. Le implora a usted que recuerde el modo en que ha llegado a sus manos la fortuna del señor Andrew Vanstone, le informa de que la mitad de esa fortuna, dividida entre sus dos hijas, era lo que su testamento les destinaba como herencia, y pide de su sentido de la justicia que haga por esas hijas lo que él hubiera hecho por sí mismo de haber vivido. En pocas palabras, le pide que entregue usted la mitad del dinero a las hijas y le deja en libertad de conservar la otra mitad para sí. Ésa es la propuesta. ¿Por qué se ha negado usted a considerarla?

- Por la razón más sencilla posible, señorita Garth -dijo Noel Vanstone de excelente humor-. Permítame que le recuerde un conocido proverbio: «Un tonto de su dinero se despide pronto». Puede que yo sea muchas cosas, señora, pero no soy tonto.

- ¡No hable usted así, señor! -le amonestó la señora Lecount-. Sea serio, se lo ruego, ¡sea serio!

- Totalmente imposible, Lecount -replicó su amo-. No puedo ser serio. Mi pobre padre, señorita Garth, adoptó un elevado punto de vista moral en este asunto. Lecount, aquí presente, adopta un elevado punto de vista moral, ¿no es así, Lecount? Yo no hago nada parecido. He vivido demasiado tiempo en el ambiente del Continente para preocuparme de puntos de vista morales. Mi conducta en este asunto es tan sencilla como dos y dos son cuatro. Yo tengo el dinero y sería un idiota de nacimiento si me separara de él. ¡Ése es mi punto de vista! Simple, ¿no le parece? No me aferró a mi dignidad; no le respondo con la ley, que está de mi parte; no la culpo por venir aquí, siendo una completa desconocida, para intentar cambiar mi resolución; no culpo a las dos muchachas por querer meter la mano en mi bolsa. Todo lo que digo es que no soy lo bastante tonto para abrirla. *Pas si bête*, como solíamos decir en el círculo inglés de Zurich. ¿Entiende usted el francés, señorita Garth? *Pas si bête*. -Dejó a un lado su plato de fresas una vez más y se limpió los dedos delicadamente con su fina servilleta blanca.

Magdalen dominó su genio. De haber podido hacerle caer muerto allí mismo levantando una mano, seguramente la hubiera levantado. Pero dominó su genio.

- ¿Debo entender -preguntó- que las últimas palabras que tiene que decir usted en este asunto, son las que se decían en su nombre en la carta de la señora Lecount?

- Exactamente -respondió Noel Vanstone.

- ¿Ha heredado usted la fortuna de su padre, además de la fortuna del señor Andrew Vanstone, y sin embargo no se siente obligado a actuar por justicia o generosidad hacia esas dos hermanas? ¿Todo lo que considera necesario decirles es que usted tiene el dinero y que se niega a separarse de un solo penique?

- ¡Lo ha expresado usted con la mayor precisión! Señorita Garth, es usted una mujer de negocios. Lecount, la señorita Garth es una mujer de negocios.

- No recurra a mí, señor -exclamó la señora Lecount, retorciéndose graciosamente las blancas y regordetas manos-. ¡No puedo soportarlo! ¡Debo intervenir! Permítame sugerirle... Oh, ¿cómo lo llaman ustedes en inglés...? Un compromiso. Querido señor Noel, se niega usted obstinadamente a hacerse justicia; tiene usted mejores motivos que el que ha ofrecido a la señorita Garth. Usted sigue el ejemplo de su honorable padre; usted considera que debe actuar en este asunto como antes actuó él en honor a su memoria. Ése es el motivo, señorita Garth. Se lo imploro de rodillas, acéptelo como su motivo. Hará lo que hizo su padre, ni más ni menos. Su querido padre hizo un ofrecimiento y él lo repetirá ahora. Sí, señor Noel, recuerde lo que la pobrecilla dice en su carta. Su hermana se ha visto obligada a emplearse como institutriz y, en cuanto a ella, al perder su fortuna ha perdido también la esperanza de casarse en muchos años. ¿Lo recordará y entregará a cada una las cien libras que su admirable padre les ofreció antes? Si lo hace, señorita Garth, ¿será bastante? ¿Si da cien libras a cada una de las desventuradas hermanas...?

- Se arrepentirá del insulto durante el resto de su vida -dijo Magdalen.

En el instante mismo en que esa respuesta escapó de sus labios, Magdalen hubiera dado cualquier cosa por retirarla. La señora Lecount había clavado por fin su aguijón en el lugar adecuado. Aquellas irreflexivas palabras de Magdalen habían brotado con toda la vehemencia de su propia voz.

No fue sino el hábito de actuar en público lo que la salvó de hacer más palpable aún el grave error que había cometido intentando enmendarlo. La práctica en el mundo teatral llegó en su rescate y la instó a continuar inmediatamente con la voz de la señorita Garth, como si nada hubiera ocurrido.

- Su intención es buena, señora Lecount -prosiguió-, pero causa usted daño en lugar de bien. Mis pupilas no aceptarán el compromiso que usted propone. Lamento haberme expresado con ira hace un momento; le ruego que me perdone. -Observó atentamente el rostro del ama de llaves en busca de información mientras pronunciaba aquellas palabras conciliatorias. La señora Lecount escapó a su escrutinio llevándose el pañuelo a los ojos. ¿Había notado o no en la voz de Magdalen el cambio momentáneo del tono fingido al tono natural? Imposible saberlo.

- ¡Qué más puedo hacer! -murmuró la señora Lecount detrás de su pañuelo-. Déme tiempo para pensar, déme tiempo para recobrarme. ¿Puedo retirarme, señor, unos instantes? Esta triste escena me ha destrozado los nervios. Tengo que beber un vaso de agua o creo que me desmayaré. No se vaya todavía, señorita Garth. Le ruego que nos dé tiempo para resolver este triste asunto, si podemos. Le ruego que se quede hasta que yo vuelva.

La habitación tenía dos puertas de entrada. Una, la puerta del gabinete principal, cerca de Magdalen a mano izquierda. La otra, la del gabinete del fondo, a su espalda. La señora Lecount se retiró educadamente por esta segunda -pasando por la puerta de fuelle- a fin de no molestar a la visita pasando por delante de ella. Magdalen esperó a oír que la puerta se abría y se volvía a cerrar a su espalda y luego resolvió aprovechar la oportunidad de hallarse a solas con Noel Vanstone. Acababa de comprobar personalmente la absoluta imposibilidad de despertar un impulso generoso en aquella naturaleza mezquina. Sólo le quedaba la posibilidad de tratarlo como a la cobarde criatura que era e influir en él mediante sus propios miedos.

Antes de que pudiera hablar, Noel Vanstone rompió el silencio. Por hábiles que fueran sus esfuerzos para disimularlo, se debatía entre la ira y la alarma por la deserción de su ama de llaves. Miró a su visitante con aire dubitativo; demostró una impaciencia nerviosa por tranquilizarla hasta el regreso de la señora Lecount.

- Por favor, recuerde, señora, que yo nunca he negado que éste fuera un caso difícil -empezó-. Usted acaba de decir que no pretendía ofenderme y le aseguro que yo no

quiero ofenderla a usted. ¿Le apetecen unas fresas? ¿Le gustaría ver las gangas de mi padre? Le aseguro, señora, que soy un hombre galante por naturaleza y compadezco a esas dos hermanas, sobre todo a la menor. Nómbreme el tema del amor y habrá encontrado usted mi punto flaco. Nada me complacería más que enterarme de que el pretendiente de la señorita Vanstone (le aseguro que yo siempre la llamo señorita Vanstone, igual que Lecount); nada me complacería más, como digo, señora, que enterarme de que el pretendiente de la señorita Vanstone había vuelto y se había casado con ella. Si un empréstito sirviera para traerlo de vuelta, si la garantía ofrecida fuera buena y si mi abogado considerara justificado que yo…

- Deténgase, señor Vanstone -dijo Magdalen-. Su apreciación de la persona con la que ha de enfrentarse es por completo errónea. Está usted muy equivocado al suponer que el matrimonio de la hermana menor, si pudiera casarse en una semana, alteraría en algo las convicciones que la indujeron a escribir al padre de usted y a usted mismo. No niego que sus actos puedan derivarse de una mezcla de motivos. No niego que ella se aferra a la esperanza de adelantar su matrimonio y a la esperanza de rescatar a su hermana de una vida dependiente. Pero aunque esos objetivos se cumplieran por otros medios, nada en el mundo la induciría a dejarle a usted en posesión de la herencia que su padre había destinado a sus hijas. ¡Yo la conozco, señor Vanstone! Es una desgraciada sin nombre, sin casa y sin amigos. La ley que le protege a usted, la ley que protege a todos los hijos legítimos la deja a ella de lado, como a la carroña. Esa ley es la de usted, no la de ella. Ella sólo la conoce como instrumento de una vil opresión, de una injusticia insufrible. El sentido de esa injusticia la atormenta como si estuviera poseída por el diablo. La determinación de reparar esa injusticia arde en ella como el fuego. Si esa desgraciada joven estuviera casada y dispusiera de millones mañana mismo, ¿cree usted que se apartaría lo más mínimo de su propósito? ¡Le aseguro que lucharía hasta el último aliento de su cuerpo contra la vil injusticia que ha caído sobre las desvalidas hijas a causa de la calamidad de la muerte de su padre! ¡Le aseguro que no tendría escrúpulos en utilizar cualquier medio que una mujer desesperada pudiera emplear para obligarle a abrir esa mano que usted tiene cerrada, o morir en el intento!

Magdalen se interrumpió bruscamente. Una vez más su indomable ardor la había traicionado. Una vez más, la nobleza innata de su naturaleza pervertida había demostrado su superioridad sobre el engaño que se había rebajado a practicar. El ardid del momento se desvaneció de sus pensamientos y la resolución de su vida se abrió paso hacia el exterior con sus propias palabras y su propio tono, manando a borbotones de su corazón. Vio al enano abyecto que tenía ante sí, callando cobardemente en su silla. ¿Le habían dejado sus miedos el juicio suficiente para percibir el cambio de voz? No; su rostro le delataba: sus miedos lo habían desconcertado. Esta vez la casualidad del momento había acudido en su ayuda. La puerta de detrás de su silla no se había abierto aún. «No me han escuchado más oídos que los suyos -pensó con inconmensurable alivio-. Me he librado de la señora Lecount.»

No era así. La señora Lecount no había abandonado la habitación en ningún momento.

Tras abrir la puerta y volver a cerrarla sin salir por ella, el ama de llaves se había arrodillado silenciosamente tras la silla de Magdalen. Apoyándose en la jamba de la puerta de fuelle, se sacó unas tijeras del bolsillo, esperó a que el señor Noel Vanstone (a cuya vista quedaba completamente oculta) atrajera la atención de Magdalen dirigiéndole la palabra y se inclinó esgrimiendo las tijeras. La falda del vestido de la falsa señorita Garth -el vestido de alpaca marrón con lunares blancos- tocaba el suelo al alcance del ama de llaves. La señora Lecount alzó el primero de los dos volantes que adornaban el bajo del vestido, uno sobre otro, cortó con cuidado un pequeño fragmento irregular de tela del segundo y volvió a alisar pulcramente por encima el primer volante para ocultar el agujero. Cuando Magdalen pronunció sus últimas frases, ella ya se había guardado las tijeras en el bolsillo y se había puesto en pie (ocultándose tras la jamba de la puerta de fuelle). La señora Lecount repitió tranquilamente la ceremonia de abrir y cerrar la puerta del gabinete del fondo y regresó a su asiento.

- ¿Qué ha ocurrido en mi ausencia, señor? -inquirió, dirigiéndose a su amo con expresión de alarma-. ¡Está usted pálido, está alterado! Oh, señorita Garth, ¿ha olvidado usted la advertencia que le he hecho en la otra habitación?

- La señorita Garth lo ha olvidado todo -exclamó el señor Noel Vanstone, recobrando la compostura con la aparición de la señora Lecount-. La señorita Garth me ha amenazado del modo más ultrajante. Le prohíbo que compadezca a ninguna de esas dos jóvenes nunca más, Lecount, sobre todo a la menor. ¡Es la criatura más miserable de la que he oído hablar en mi vida, capaz de cualquier cosa! Si no consigue mi dinero por las buenas, amenaza con obtenerlo por las malas. La señorita Garth acaba de decírmelo a la cara. ¡A la cara! -repitió, cruzándose de brazos como si lo hubieran insultado gravemente.

- Cálmese, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. Se lo ruego, cálmese y déjeme hablar con la señorita Garth. Lamento oír, señora, que ha olvidado usted lo que le he dicho en la habitación contigua. Ha alterado usted al señor Noel, ha comprometido los intereses por los que había venido a abogar y se ha limitado a repetir lo que ya sabíamos. El lenguaje que se ha permitido usar en mi ausencia es el mismo que su pupila cometió la insensatez de emplear cuando escribió por segunda vez a mi difunto amo. ¿Cómo puede una señora de su edad y su experiencia repetir seriamente tales necedades? Esa joven alardea y amenaza. Hará esto, hará lo otro. Usted goza de su confianza, señora. Dígame, por favor, en pocas palabras, ¿qué puede hacer?

Pese a la sagacidad con que fue lanzada la pulla, rebotó sin causar daño. La señora Lecount había clavado su aguijón con demasiada frecuencia. Magdalen se levantó con un dominio absoluto de su personaje y dio tranquilamente por concluida la entrevista. Aunque ignoraba lo que había ocurrido detrás de la silla, notó un cambio en la expresión y los modales de la señora Lecount que le aconsejaron no correr más riesgos y no permanecer más tiempo en aquella casa.

- No gozo de la confianza de mi pupila -dijo-. Ella responderá personalmente con sus actos a su pregunta cuando llegue el momento. Sólo puedo decirle, por mi experiencia de su carácter, que no es jactanciosa. Lo que escribió al señor Michael Vanstone era lo que estaba dispuesta a hacer, lo que tengo razones para creer que estaba a punto de hacer cuando la muerte de él echó por tierra sus planes. El hijo del señor Michael Vanstone sólo tiene que insistir en seguir el ejemplo de su padre para averiguar sin mucha tardanza que no me equivoco en lo que respecta a mi pupila y que no he venido aquí para intimidarle con vanas amenazas. He cumplido con mi tarea. Dejo al señor Noel Vanstone que elija entre dos alternativas: compartir la fortuna del señor Andrew Vanstone con las hijas del señor Andrew Vanstone o persistir en su negativa y atenerse a las consecuencias. -Inclinó la cabeza y se dirigió a la puerta.

Noel Vanstone se puso en pie, luchando su ira y su alarma por decidir cuál de las dos habría de expresarse primero en su rostro completamente demudado. Antes de que pudiera abrir la boca, las manos regordetas de la señora Lecount se posaron sobre sus hombros, lo sentaron nuevamente en su silla con suavidad y devolvieron el plato de fresas a su antigua posición sobre el regazo.

- Coma unas cuantas fresas más, señor Noel -dijo-, y déjeme a mí a la señorita Garth.

Siguió a Magdalen al pasillo y cerró la puerta a su espalda.

- ¿Reside usted en Londres, señora? -preguntó la señora Lecount.

- No -contestó Magdalen-. Resido en el campo.

- Si quisiera escribirle, ¿adonde puedo dirigir mi carta?

- A la oficina de correos de Birmingham -dijo Magdalen, mencionando el último lugar en el que se había alojado y adonde todavía le enviaban todas las cartas.

La señora Lecount repitió la dirección para fijarla en su memoria, avanzó dos pasos y puso tranquilamente la mano derecha sobre el brazo de Magdalen.

- Un consejo, señora -dijo-, antes de que se vaya. Es usted una mujer audaz e inteligente. No sea demasiado audaz, no sea demasiado inteligente. Arriesga más de lo que cree. -De repente se puso de puntillas y susurró sus siguientes palabras al oído de

Magdalen-: ¡La tengo en la palma de mi mano! -dijo la señora Lecount, siseando con violento énfasis cada sílaba. Apretó la mano izquierda a hurtadillas mientras hablaba. Era la mano que ocultaba el fragmento de tela del vestido de Magdalen, la mano que lo sostenía con fuerza en aquel momento.

- ¿Qué quiere usted decir? -preguntó Magdalen, apartándola de sí.

La señora Lecount se alejó cortésmente para abrir la puerta principal.

- Ahora no quiero decir nada -dijo-. Espere un poco, puede que se vea con el tiempo. Una última pregunta, señora, antes de despedirnos. Cuando su pupila era una niña pequeña e inocente, ¿se divertía alguna vez construyendo castillos de naipes?

Magdalen contestó con impaciencia haciendo un gesto afirmativo.

- ¿La vio usted alguna vez construir un castillo cada vez más alto -prosiguió la señora Lecount- hasta convertirse en una auténtica pagoda de naipes? ¿Vio usted alguna vez cómo se agrandaban sus ojos infantiles al mirarlo y se sentía tan orgullosa de lo que ya había hecho que quería hacer más? ¿La vio usted alguna vez mantener firme su suave manita, contener su respiración inocente y poner una carta más en la cima? ¿Vio caer el castillo entero, un segundo después, hecho un montón de ruinas sobre la mesa? Ah, lo vio. Por favor, déle un mensaje amistoso de mi parte. Me atrevería a decir que su castillo ya es demasiado alto; le recomiendo que tenga cuidado antes de poner esa última carta.

- Recibirá su mensaje -dijo Magdalen con la aspereza y la enfática inclinación de cabeza de la señorita Garth-. Pero dudo que le preocupe. Su mano es bastante más firme de lo que usted supone, y creo que colocará esa última carta.

- Derribando el castillo -dijo la señora Lecount.

- Y volviéndolo a construir -replicó Magdalen-. Le deseo buenos días.

- Buenos días -dijo la señora Lecount, abriendo la puerta-. Una última cosa, señorita Garth. ¡Piense usted en lo que le he dicho en la habitación de atrás! ¡No deje de probar el ungüento amarillo para esa dolorosa afección de sus ojos!

Cuando Magdalen atravesó el umbral de la puerta, el cartero subía los peldaños de la casa con una carta en la mano, escogida del montón.

- ¿El señor Noel Vanstone? -oyó decir al hombre cuando iba por el jardín en dirección a la calle.

Traspasó la verja. Poco se imaginaba ella de qué nuevas dificultades y peligros la había salvado su oportuna partida. La carta que el cartero acababa de depositar en las manos del ama de llaves no era otra que el anónimo enviado a Noel Vanstone por el capitán Wragge.

CAPÍTULO IV

La señora Lecount regresó al gabinete con el fragmento del vestido de Magdalen en una mano y la carta del capitán Wragge en la otra.

- ¿Se ha desembarazado usted de ella? -preguntó Noel Vanstone-. ¿Le ha cerrado por fin la puerta en las narices a la señorita Garth?

- No la llame señorita Garth, señor -dijo el ama de llaves con una sonrisa de desprecio-. Es la señorita Garth tanto como usted. Nos han obsequiado con la interpretación de una inteligente farsa, y si hubiéramos despojado a nuestra visitante de su disfraz, creo que debajo habríamos encontrado a la señorita Vanstone en persona. Aquí tiene una carta que acaba de entregarme el cartero.

La dejó sobre la mesa al alcance de su amo. El asombro de Noel Vanstone ante el descubrimiento que acababa de serle comunicado concentró toda su atención en el rostro de la señora Lecount. Ni siquiera llegó a mirar la carta que ella había colocado delante de él.

- Créame, señor -prosiguió la señora Lecount, sentándose tranquilamente-. Cuando nuestra visitante llegue a casa, guardará sus cabellos grises en una caja y se curará esa dolorosa afección de los ojos con agua caliente y una esponja. Si se hubiera pintado las arrugas de la cara tan bien como se ha pintado la inflamación de los ojos, la luz no me habría mostrado nada y sin duda me habría engañado. Pero he visto las arrugas pintadas, he visto la piel de una mujer joven debajo de ese cutis sucio. He oído, en esta habitación, su voz auténtica traicionada por un arrebato, así como otra voz falseada por el acento, y creo que el aspecto de esa señora era falso de los pies a la cabeza. Era la chica en persona, señor Noel, y una chica muy audaz, además.

- ¿Por qué no ha cerrado usted la puerta y llamado a la policía? -preguntó el señor Noel-. Mi padre habría llamado a la policía. Usted sabe tan bien como yo, Lecount, que mi padre habría llamado a la policía.

- Perdóneme, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-, pero creo que su padre hubiera esperado a tener para la policía algo más que lo que nosotros tenemos ahora. Volveremos a ver a esa joven, señor. Quizá la próxima vez venga aquí con su propio rostro y su propia voz. Tengo curiosidad por ver cómo es su cara. Tengo curiosidad por saber si lo que oí de su voz en un arrebato bastará para que la reconozca cuando esté tranquila. Obra en mi poder un pequeño recuerdo de su visita que ella no conoce, y no escapará de mí tan fácilmente como cree. Si resulta ser un recuerdo útil, le haré saber lo que es. En caso contrario, me abstendré de molestarle con semejante insignificancia. Permítame recordarle, señor, la carta que tiene al lado. Aún no la ha leído.

Noel Vanstone abrió la carta. Dio un respingo cuando leyó las primeras líneas, vaciló, y luego acabó de leer a toda prisa. El papel se le cayó de la mano y él se desplomó en la silla. La señora Lecount se puso en pie con la velocidad de una mujer joven y recogió la carta.

- ¿Qué ha ocurrido, señor? -preguntó. Su rostro cambió al formular la pregunta, y sus grandes ojos negros se endurecieron violentamente, con auténtico asombro y alarma.

- Llame a la policía -exclamó su amo-. Lecount, insisto en que he de ser protegido. ¡Llame a la policía!

- ¿Puedo leer la carta, señor?

Él agitó la mano débilmente. La señora Lecount leyó la carta con atención y cuando terminó la dejó sobre la mesa sin hacer comentarios.

- ¿No tiene nada que decirme? -preguntó Noel Vanstone, mirando a su ama de llaves con

profunda consternación-. ¡Lecount, van a robarme! El sinvergüenza que ha escrito esta carta lo sabe todo y no quiere contarme nada a menos que le pague. ¡Van a robarme! Sobre esta mesa hay bienes por valor de miles de libras, bienes que jamás podrán ser reemplazadas, bienes que ni todas las testas coronadas de Europa podrían reunir aunque lo intentaran. ¡Cierre puertas y ventanas a cal y canto, Lecount, y llame a la policía!

En lugar de obedecerle, la señora Lecount cogió un gran abanico de papel verde del manto de la chimenea y se sentó frente a su amo.

- Está usted excitado, señor Noel -dijo-, está acalorado. Permítame que le refresque.

Con el rostro tan duro como siempre -con menos cariño en la expresión y las maneras del que mostrarían la mayoría de las mujeres al rescatar a una mosca medio ahogada en una jarra de leche-, le abanicó paciente y silenciosamente durante más de cinco minutos. Ningún ojo experto que observara la peculiar palidez azulada del cutis de Noel Vanstone y la acentuada dificultad con que respiraba hubiera dejado de percibir que el gran órgano de la vida era en aquel hombre, como el ama de llaves antes había afirmado, demasiado débil para la función que se le había designado. El corazón se afanaba penosamente en realizar su trabajo como si fuera el de un anciano.

- ¿Se siente más aliviado, señor? -preguntó la señora Lecount-. ¿Puede pensar un poco? ¿Puede ejercitar su buen juicio?

Se levantó y puso la mano sobre el corazón de su amo con una atención tan mecánica y un interés tan poco genuino como si tocara los platos de la cena para cerciorarse de que habían sido debidamente calentados.

- Sí -prosiguió, y sentándose de nuevo volvió a abrir el abanico-, ya está mejorando, señor Noel. No me pregunte por esa carta anónima hasta que haya reflexionado y me haya dado primero su opinión. -Siguió abanicándole sin dejar de mirarle a la cara atentamente-. Piense -dijo-, piense sin molestarse en expresar sus pensamientos, señor. Confíe en que sabré leerlos gracias a la total armonía de nuestras opiniones. Sí, señor Noel, esa carta es un miserable intento de asustarle. ¿Qué dice? Dice que es usted el objeto de una conspiración dirigida por la señorita Vanstone. Eso ya lo sabemos, la señora de los ojos inflamados nos lo ha dicho. Nos burlamos de esa conspiración. ¿Qué más dice la carta? Dice que su autor posee una valiosa información que le dará si paga usted por ella. ¿Cómo ha llamado a esa persona hace un momento, señor?

- Le he llamado sinvergüenza -dijo Noel Vanstone, recobrando su vanidad e irguiéndose lentamente en la silla.

- Estoy de acuerdo con usted, señor, como en todo lo demás -prosiguió la señora Lecount-. Es un sinvergüenza que posee realmente la información y que habla en serio, o es un portavoz de la señorita Vanstone y ella le ha hecho escribir esa carta con el propósito de desconcertarnos mediante otra forma de disfraz. Tanto si la carta es falsa como si es auténtica (¿no estoy leyendo ahora sus pensamientos, más atinados que los míos, señor Noel?), usted sabe que no le conviene poner en guardia a sus enemigos utilizando a la policía en este asunto, al menos no demasiado pronto. Estoy completamente de acuerdo con usted. Nada de policía por el momento. Dejará usted que ese hombre o mujer anónimos suponga que se asusta fácilmente; le tenderá una trampa para conseguir la información en respuesta a la trampa que le han tendido para conseguir su dinero. Responderá usted a la carta y verá el resultado, y sólo pagará los gastos de emplear a la policía cuando sepa que esos gastos son necesarios. De nuevo estoy de acuerdo con usted; nada de gastos, si podemos evitarlo. Mis pensamientos y los suyos, señor Noel, con respecto a este asunto, son idénticos en todos los detalles.

- Es así como lo ve usted, Lecount, ¿no es cierto? -dijo Noel Vanstone-. Lo mismo pienso yo; ciertamente eso es lo que pienso. No pagaré ni un penique a la policía si puedo evitarlo. -Volvió a coger la carta y tras una segunda lectura se sintió irritado y perplejo-. ¡Pero ese hombre quiere dinero! -espetó con impaciencia-. Parece usted olvidar, Lecount, que ese hombre quiere dinero.

- Dinero que usted le ofrecerá, señor -replicó la señora Lecount-, pero que, como usted había previsto ya, no le será entregado. ¡Ni hablar! Dirá usted a ese hombre: «Extienda la mano, señor», y cuando la tenga extendida le dará una palmada por las molestias y se meterá la mano en el bolsillo. ¡Me alegra tanto verle reír, señor Noel! Me alegra que haya recuperado el buen humor. Responderemos a la carta mediante un anuncio en el periódico, como indica su autor. ¡Esos anuncios son tan baratos! Tiembla un poco su pobre mano, señor. ¿Quiere que empuñe la pluma por usted? No estoy capacitada para hacer más, pero siempre puedo prometerle sostener la pluma.

Sin esperar respuesta, el ama de llaves se dirigió al gabinete del fondo y regresó con pluma, tinta y papel. Colocando un cuaderno de papel secante sobre sus rodillas y con un aspecto modélico de alegre sumisión, se instaló una vez más frente a la silla de su amo.

- ¿Quiere que escriba a su dictado, señor? -inquirió-. ¿O hago un breve borrador y lo corrige usted luego? Redactaré un breve borrador. Déjeme ver la carta. Tenemos que publicar el anuncio en *The Times* y dirigirlo a «Un amigo desconocido». ¿Qué digo, señor Noel? Espere; lo escribiré y luego podrá verlo por usted mismo: «Se solicita a un amigo desconocido que indique (mediante anuncio) una dirección a la que poder enviarle una carta. La información que ofrece será recompensada con una suma de...» ¿Qué suma de dinero desea que escriba, señor?

- No escriba nada -dijo Noel Vanstone con un súbito arrebato de impaciencia-. Las cuestiones de dinero son cosa mía; digo que las cuestiones de dinero son cosa mía, Lecount. Déjemelo a mí.

- Por supuesto, señor -dijo el ama de llaves, alargando el cuaderno de papel secante a su amo-. No olvidará ser generoso al ofrecer dinero, ¿verdad?, sabiendo de antemano que no piensa desprenderse de él.

- ¡No me dicte, Lecount! ¡No me someteré a su dictado! -dijo Noel Vanstone, cada vez más impaciente en reafirmar su independencia-. Tengo intención de llevar este asunto yo mismo. ¡Yo mando, Lecount!

- Usted manda, señor.

- Mi padre mandaba antes que yo. Y yo soy hijo de mi padre. ¡Le digo, Lecount, que soy hijo de mi padre!

La señora Lecount inclinó la cabeza con gesto sumiso.

- Tengo intención de escribir la suma de dinero que yo considere conveniente -prosiguió Noel Vanstone, asintiendo vehementemente con su menuda cabeza rubia-. Quiero enviar este anuncio en persona. La criada lo llevará a la librería para que lo publiquen en *The Times*. Cuando haga sonar la campanilla dos veces, envíeme a la criada. ¿Lo ha entendido, Lecount? Envíeme a la criada.

La señora Lecount volvió a inclinar la cabeza y se dirigió despacio hacia la puerta. Sabía con exactitud cuándo dirigir a su amo y cuándo dejarlo actuar por sí solo. La experiencia le había enseñado a gobernarlo en todos los puntos esenciales y a ceder después en todos los puntos menores. Era característico de su débil naturaleza -como lo es de todas las naturalezas débiles-, que el señor Noel Vanstone se impusiera obstinadamente en las menudencias. Rellenar el espacio en blanco del anuncio era la menudencia en aquel caso, y la señora Lecount acalló las sospechas de su amo de estar siendo dirigido concediéndosela inmediatamente. «Mi mula ha coceado -pensó para sí en su propia lengua, cuando abría la puerta-. Nada más puedo hacer hoy con ella.»

- ¡Lecount! -gritó su amo cuando se disponía a salir al pasillo-. Vuelva.

La señora Lecount volvió.

- No la habré ofendido, ¿verdad? -preguntó Noel Vanstone con inquietud.

- Por supuesto que no, señor -contestó la señora Lecount-. Como usted acaba de decir, usted manda.

- ¡Magnífica criatura! Déme la mano. -Le besó la mano y sonrió con gran satisfacción por su afectuoso proceder-. ¡Lecount, es usted una noble criatura!

- Gracias, señor -dijo el ama de llaves. Hizo una reverencia y salió. «Si tuviera cerebro en esa cabeza de mono suya -dijo para sus adentros una vez en el pasillo-, ¡menudo granuja sería!»

Solo en el gabinete, Noel Vanstone se sumió en inquietas reflexiones sobre el espacio en blanco del anuncio. La insinuación aparentemente superflua de la señora Lecount, que fuera generoso al ofrecer dinero puesto que no tenía intención de desprenderse de él, se basaba en un profundo conocimiento de su carácter. Noel Vanstone había heredado el sórdido amor de su padre por el dinero, sin heredar la capacidad práctica de su padre para ver los usos a los que puede destinarse el dinero. Su única idea en relación con las riquezas era la de conservarlas... Era tan avaro por naturaleza que la mera perspectiva teórica de ser generoso le intimidaba. Empuñó la pluma, volvió a dejarla y leyó la carta anónima por tercera vez, meneando la cabeza con suspicacia. «Si le ofrezco a este hombre una gran suma de dinero -pensó de repente-, ¿cómo sé que no hallará un modo de hacérmela pagar realmente? Las mujeres siempre tienen prisas. Lecount siempre tiene prisa. Tengo toda la tarde a mi disposición. Aprovecharé la tarde para meditarlo.»

Malhumoradamente, dejó el cuaderno de papel secante y el borrador del anuncio sobre la silla que la señora Lecount acababa de abandonar. Cuando regresó a la suya, meneó su pequeña cabeza con solemnidad y se alisó el blanco batín sobre las rodillas con el aire de un hombre absorto en angustiadas reflexiones. Transcurrieron los minutos; los cuartos y las horas se sucedieron unos a otros en la esfera del reloj de la señora Lecount, y Noel Vanstone seguía perdido en un mar de dudas, seguía sin perturbar la tranquilidad de la campanilla del gabinete para llamar a la criada.

Mientras tanto, tras despedirse de la señora Lecount, Magdalen se había abstenido prudentemente de cruzar la calle para llegar a su alojamiento, y sólo se había atrevido a regresar después de dar un rodeo por la vecindad. De nuevo en Vauxhall Walk, el primer objeto que atrajo su atención fue un coche de punto parado a la puerta de su pensión. Unos cuantos pasos más le permitieron ver a la hija de la patrona de pie junto al coche, enzarzada en una disputa con el cochero por el precio del trayecto. Observando que la muchacha le daba la espalda, Magdalen aprovechó inmediatamente la circunstancia y se introdujo en la casa sin ser vista.

Recorrió el pasillo, subió por las escaleras y se encontró en el primer descansillo, ¡cara a cara!, con su compañera de viaje. Allí estaba la señora Wragge abrazada a una pila de pequeños paquetes, esperando con ansiedad el resultado de la disputa con el cochero en la calle. Dar media vuelta era imposible; un airado vocerío se adentraba en el pasillo de abajo. Vacilar era totalmente inútil. No le quedaba más que una salida, la de seguir adelante, y Magdalen se lanzó a ella con desesperación. Apartó a la señora Wragge para pasar sin decir una palabra, corrió a su habitación, se despojó de capa, sombrero y peluca y los escondió arrojándolos al espacio vacío entre la cabecera del sofá cama y la pared.

En los primeros instantes, el asombro privó del habla a la señora Wragge y la dejó clavada en el sitio. Dos de los paquetes que sostenía en los brazos se le cayeron en las escaleras. La visión de tamaña catástrofe la reanimó.

- ¡Ladrones! -gritó la señora Wragge, súbitamente acometida por esa idea-. ¡Ladrones!

Magdalen la oyó a través de la puerta de su habitación, que no había tenido tiempo de cerrar completamente.

- ¿Es usted, señora Wragge? -llamó con su voz normal-. ¿Qué ocurre? -Cogió una toalla mientras hablaba, la mojó y se la pasó rápidamente por la parte inferior del rostro. Al oír la voz familiar, la señora Wragge giró en redondo, se le cayó un tercer paquete y,

olvidándolo en medio de su asombro, subió el segundo tramo de escaleras. Magdalen salió al descansillo del primer piso apretándose la frente con la toalla como si sufriera dolor de cabeza. Necesitaba tiempo para quitarse las cejas postizas y una supuesta jaqueca fue el pretexto más conveniente que pudo hallar para ocultarlas.

- ¿A qué vienen esos gritos que perturban la casa? -preguntó-. Silencio, por favor, tengo un espantoso dolor de cabeza.

- ¿Ocurre algo, señora? -preguntó la patrona desde el pasillo.

- Nada en absoluto -contestó Magdalen-. Mi amiga es tímida y la disputa con el cochero la ha asustado. Pague a ese hombre lo que pida y déjele marchar.

- ¿Dónde está? -preguntó la señora Wragge en un trémulo susurro-. ¿Dónde está la mujer que ha pasado corriendo por mi lado y se ha metido en su habitación?

- ¡Bah! -dijo Magdalen-. No ha pasado ninguna mujer por su lado, como usted dice. Entre y véalo usted misma.

Abrió la puerta. La señora Wragge entró en la habitación, miró por todas partes, no vio a nadie, y mostró su asombro por el resultado dejando caer un cuarto paquete y temblando de pies a cabeza sin poderlo evitar.

- La he visto entrar aquí -dijo la señora Wragge con voz temerosa-. Una mujer con una capa gris y un sombrero papalina. Una maleducada. Ha pasado corriendo por mi lado en la escalera; eso es lo que ha hecho. Aquí está la habitación y no hay ninguna mujer en ella. ¡Dénos un devocionario! -exclamó, adquiriendo una palidez cadavérica mientras el resto de la colección de paquetes se le caía a los pies formando una pequeña cascada-. Quiero leer algo piadoso. Quiero pensar en mi muerte. ¡He visto un fantasma!

- ¡Tonterías! -dijo Magdalen-. Está soñando despierta; las compras han sido demasiado para usted. Métase en su cuarto y quítese el sombrero.

- He oído hablar de fantasmas en camisón, fantasmas con sábana y fantasmas encadenados -prosiguió la señora Wragge, petrificada en su propio círculo mágico de paquetes de ropa interior y telas-. Aquí hay un fantasma peor que todos ellos, un fantasma con capa gris y sombrero papalina. Sé lo que es -continuó la señora Wragge, deshaciéndose en lágrimas de arrepentimiento-. Es mi castigo por ser tan feliz lejos del capitán. Es mi castigo por haber llevado los zapatos en chancletas en la mitad de las tiendas de Londres, primero un pie y luego el otro, todo el tiempo que he estado fuera. Soy una pecadora. No me deje; haga lo que haga, querida, ¡no me deje! -Aferró el brazo de Magdalen con fuerza y sufrió un nuevo ataque de temblores ante la mera idea de quedarse sola.

La única alternativa que quedaba en una emergencia como aquélla era la de someterse a las circunstancias. Magdalen condujo a la señora Wragge a una silla tras haber colocado ésta en una posición que le permitiera darle la espalda mientras se quitaba las cejas postizas con la ayuda de un poco de agua.

- Espere ahí un momento -dijo- e intente tranquilizarse mientras me mojo la cabeza.

- ¿Tranquilizarme? -repitió la señora Wragge-. ¿Cómo voy a tranquilizarme cuando parece que tenga la cabeza separada del cuerpo? El peor zumbido que me haya provocado el libro de cocina no es nada comparado con el zumbido que me provoca ahora el fantasma. ¡Qué triste final para unas vacaciones! Puede usted llevarme a casa cuando quiera, querida. ¡Yo ya he tenido bastante!

Tras lograr por fin quitarse las cejas postizas, Magdalen era libre para combatir la desafortunada impresión producida en la mente de su compañera con todas las armas disuasorias que pudiera esgrimir su ingenio.

Su empeño resultó vano. La señora Wragge persistió en creer -basándose en pruebas que, dicho sea de paso, hubieran satisfecho a muchos videntes más juiciosos que ella-

que había sido obsequiada con una visita sobrenatural del mundo de los espíritus. Lo único que pudo hacer Magdalen fue comprobar mediante un cuidadoso interrogatorio que la señora Wragge no había sido lo bastante perspicaz para identificar al supuesto fantasma como el personaje de la vieja señora del norte de su espectáculo. Una vez convencida sobre ese particular, no le quedaba más recurso que dejar el resto a la incapacidad natural para retener impresiones -a menos que esas impresiones se renovaran continuamente- que era una de las debilidades características de la mente de su compañera. Tras animar a la señora Wragge asegurándole reiteradas veces que una aparición (según las leyes y reglas de los fantasmas) no significaba nada a menos que fuera seguida inmediatamente por otras dos, tras desviar de nuevo su atención pacientemente hacia los paquetes caídos en el suelo y en las escaleras, y tras prometer que dejaría abierta de par en par la puerta que comunicaba ambas habitaciones si ella se comprometía por su parte a retirarse a su habitación y a no decir nada más sobre el horrible asunto del fantasma, Magdalen se aseguró por fin el privilegio de reflexionar sobre los acontecimientos de aquel día memorable, sin ser interrumpida.

Su primer movimiento había tenido dos graves consecuencias. La señora Lecount le había tendido una trampa para hacerle hablar con su propia voz y había tropezado accidentalmente con la señora Wragge cuando iba disfrazada.

¿Qué ventaja había obtenido que compensara aquellos desastres? La ventaja de saber más sobre Noel Vanstone y sobre la señora Lecount de lo que habría descubierto en varios meses si se hubiera confiado a las pesquisas realizadas por otros en su nombre. Una duda que la tenía perpleja hasta entonces se había resuelto por fin. Ahora veía con claridad que era imposible aplicar al hijo el plan que había ideado contra Michael Vanstone, y que la aguda perspicacia del capitán Wragge había descubierto parcialmente cuando ella le avisó por primera vez de que debían disolver su asociación. El hábito de especular del padre había sido el eje sobre el que pivotaba toda la maquinaria de su conspiración. En el doblemente sórdido carácter del hijo no se descubría tal posición ventajosa. Noel Vanstone era invulnerable precisamente allí donde su padre podía ser atacado.

Habiendo llegado a esta conclusión, ¿cómo determinaría qué camino debía seguir en el futuro? ¿Qué nuevos medios podía descubrir que la condujeran secretamente a su objetivo, desafiando la maliciosa vigilancia de la señora Lecount y la mezquina desconfianza de Noel Vanstone?

Se hallaba sentada frente al espejo peinándose maquinalmente y con sus pensamientos ocupados por aquella consideración crucial. La agitación del momento había dado un tinte febril a sus mejillas y sus grandes ojos grises se veían más luminosos. Era consciente de que la favorecía; era consciente de que su belleza ganaba con el contraste después de quitarse el disfraz. Sus hermosos cabellos de color castaño claro parecían más espesos y suaves que nunca ahora que habían escapado de su aprisionamiento bajo la peluca gris. Los trenzó de un modo y otro con dedos ágiles y diestros; los dejó caer en bucles sobre sus hombros; los juntó echándolos hacia atrás y se puso de perfil para ver cómo caían, para ver sus hombros y su espalda libres de las deformidades artificiales de la capa con rellenos. Al poco rato volvía a mirarse en el espejo una vez más, hundía ambas manos en sus cabellos y, apoyando los codos sobre la mesa, examinaba su reflejo cada vez más cerca hasta que el aliento empañó el cristal. «Puedo tener a cualquier hombre vivo a mis pies -pensó con una sonrisa de triunfo soberbio-, ¡siempre que conserve mi belleza! Si ese desgraciado despreciable me viera ahora...» Un súbito horror hacia sí misma le impidió llevar ese pensamiento a su término. Se apartó del cristal, temblando, y se tapó el rostro con las manos.

- ¡Oh, Frank! -musitó-. ¡De no ser por ti, cuan miserable podría ser! -Sus ávidos dedos arrancaron la pequeña bolsa de seda blanca del escondite de su pecho; sus labios la devoraron con besos silenciosos-. ¡Querido mío! ¡Mi ángel! ¡Oh, Frank, cómo te amo! - Los ojos se le llenaron de lágrimas. Se los enjugó coléricamente, devolvió la bolsa a su lugar y le dio la espalda al espejo. «Ya basta de mí misma -pensó-. ¡Basta por hoy de mi loca y miserable persona!»

Horrorizada ante la previsión de su siguiente paso -horrorizada ante el futuro que

rápidamente se ensombrecía y que se asociaba ahora en sus más íntimos pensamientos con Noel Vanstone-, recorrió la habitación con mirada impaciente buscando alguna ocupación casera que pudiera distraerla. El disfraz que había arrojado entre la pared y la cama volvió a su memoria. Era imposible dejarlo allí. La señora Wragge (ocupada ahora en ordenar sus paquetes) podía cansarse de su ocupación, podía volver a entrar en cualquier momento, podía pasar junto a la cama y ver la capa gris. ¿Qué hacer?

Su primera idea fue la de poner de nuevo el disfraz en el baúl. Pero después de lo ocurrido era peligroso guardarlo tan cerca mientras ella y la señora Wragge estuvieran bajo el mismo techo. Resolvió deshacerse de él esa noche y audazmente enviarlo de nuevo a Birmingham. Su sombrerera cabía dentro del baúl. La sacó, arrojó dentro peluca y capa, y aplastó sin miramientos el sombrero por encima. El vestido (que aún no se había quitado) era suyo; la señora Wragge estaba acostumbrada a vérselo puesto, no había necesidad de devolverlo. Antes de cerrar la sombrerera, garabateó apresuradamente estas líneas en una hoja de papel: «Me llevé las cosas que se incluyen aquí por error. Por favor, guárdelas con el resto de mi equipaje hasta que reciba de nuevo noticias mías». Colocó el papel sobre el sombrero, escribió la dirección del capitán Wragge en Birmingham sobre la sombrerera, la llevó abajo inmediatamente y envió a la hija de la patrona con ella a la estafeta postal más próxima. «Una dificultad resuelta», pensó, volviendo a su habitación.

La señora Wragge estaba todavía ocupada en ordenar sus paquetes sobre su estrecho camastro. Se dio la vuelta con un débil grito cuando entró Magdalen.

- Creía que era el fantasma otra vez -dijo la señora Wragge-. Intento que lo que me ha ocurrido me sirva de lección, querida. He ordenado todos mis paquetes tal como al capitán le gustaría verlos. Llevo los dos zapatos bien calzados. Si cierro los ojos esta noche (cosa que no creo que haga), me dormiré tan recta como me lo permitan las piernas. Y jamás volveré a tener otras vacaciones tan largas en toda mi vida. Espero ser perdonada -dijo la señora Wragge, meneando lúgubremente la cabeza-. Espero humildemente que seré perdonada.

- ¡Perdonada! -repitió Magdalen-. Si otras mujeres necesitaran ser perdonadas tan poco como usted... ¡Bueno!, ¡bueno! ¿Qué le parece si abre algunos de estos paquetes? ¡Vamos! Quiero ver lo que ha comprado hoy.

La señora Wragge vaciló, suspiró con arrepentimiento, reflexionó unos instantes, alargó la mano tímidamente hacia uno de los paquetes, pensó en la advertencia sobrenatural, y se apartó de sus propias compras con un desesperado ejercicio de control sobre sí misma.

- Abra éste -dijo Magdalen para animarla-. ¿Qué es?

Los apagados ojos azules de la señora Wragge empezaron a brillar débilmente pese a sus remordimientos, pero sacudió la cabeza con abnegación. La pasión dominante de las compras podía volver a reclamar lo que era suyo, pero el fantasma aún no había sido conjurado.

- ¿Lo ha comprado a buen precio? -preguntó Magdalen confidencialmente.

- ¡Baratísimo! -exclamó la pobre señora Wragge, cayendo en la trampa de cabeza y abalanzándose sobre el paquete con tanta avidez como si no hubiera ocurrido nada.

Magdalen la tuvo comentando sus compras durante más de una hora y luego decidió sensatamente distraer su atención de todo recuerdo fantasmal de otro modo, llevándola a dar un paseo.

Cuando abandonaban su alojamiento, la puerta de la casa de Noel Vanstone se abrió y apareció la criada con un nuevo encargo que cumplir. Al parecer le habían encomendado una carta en aquella ocasión, que llevaba cuidadosamente en la mano. Consciente de no haber formado aún plan alguno, ni para el ataque ni para la defensa, Magdalen se preguntó con un temor momentáneo si la señora Lecount había decidido ya entablar nuevos contactos y si la carta estaba dirigida a la «señorita Garth».

La carta no tenía tal destinataria. Noel Vanstone había resuelto por fin su problema pecuniario. El espacio en blanco del anuncio se había rellenado y la contestación de la señora Lecount a la advertencia anónima del capitán Wragge estaba a punto de ser insertada en *The Times*.

FIN DE LA TERCERA ESCENA

ENTREACTO

DESARROLLO DE LA HISTORIA A TRAVÉS DEL CORREO

I

EXTRACTO DE LOS ANUNCIOS DE THE TIMES

Se solicita a un amigo desconocido que indique (mediante anuncio) una dirección a la que poder enviarle una carta. La información que ofrece será recompensada con una suma de cinco libras.

II

DEL CAPITÁN WRAGGE A MAGDALEN

Birmingham, 2 de julio de 1847

Mi querida niña:

La sombrerera que contenía los enseres del disfraz que se llevó por error han llegado indemnes a mis manos. Considérelos bajo mi especial protección hasta que vuelva a recibir noticias suyas.

Aprovecho esta oportunidad para asegurarle, una vez más, mi inalterable fidelidad a sus intereses. Sin pretender abusar de su confianza, ¿podría preguntarle si el señor Noel Vanstone ha accedido a hacerle justicia? Mucho me temo que se ha negado, en cuyo caso, con la mano en el corazón declaro solemnemente que su mezquindad me repugna. ¿Por qué tengo el presentimiento de que ha apelado usted a él en vano? ¿Por qué me veo a mí mismo considerando a ese individuo bajo el aspecto de un insecto nocivo? No nos conocemos en absoluto; no sé nada de él excepto lo que averigüé para usted. ¿Ha convertido en proféticas mis percepciones la profunda simpatía que siento hacia sus intereses?, o, por decirlo de un modo más fantástico, ¿existe en realidad lo que se llama estado de existencia previo, y me ha insultado gravemente el señor Noel Vanstone, pongamos que en algún otro planeta?

Le escribo, querida Magdalen, como ve, con mi acostumbrada pincelada de humor, pero hablo en serio al poner mis servicios a su disposición. No permita que la cuestión de las condiciones sea motivo del menor recelo. Acepto de antemano cualquier condición que quiera imponer. Si sus planes actuales apuntan a ese objetivo, estoy dispuesto a exprimir al señor Noel Vanstone en beneficio de usted hasta que exude oro por cada poro de su piel. Disculpe la crudeza de esta metáfora. Mi impaciencia por serle útil interfiere en mis palabras, deposita su significado en bruto a sus pies y deja al gusto de usted pulirlo con los más escogidos adornos de la lengua inglesa.

¿Cómo está mi desafortunada esposa? Me temo que hallará usted imposible conseguir que no tuerza los pies, o moldear su apariencia externa para que armonice con las leyes universales de simetría y orden. ¿Ha intentado tomarse demasiadas confianzas con usted? Siempre he tenido la costumbre de contenerla a ese respecto. Jamás le he permitido llamarme otra cosa que capitán, y en las raras ocasiones, desde nuestra unión, en que las circunstancias puedan haberla obligado a dirigirse a mí por carta, he restringido severamente su saludo inicial a la fórmula «Querido señor». Acepte estos insignificantes detalles de la vida de familia como sugerencias que pueden serle útiles para dominar a la señora Wragge, y, créame, aguardo con impaciencia recibir sus noticias. Suyo afectísimo,

HORATIO WRAGGE

III

DE NORAH A MAGDALEN

Westmoreland House, Kensington,

1 de julio

Mi queridísima Magdalen:

Cuando vuelvas a escribirme (¡y por favor escríbeme pronto!) envíame tu carta a la dirección de la señorita Garth. He dejado mi colocación y puede que transcurra cierto tiempo hasta que encuentre otra.

Ahora que todo ha terminado, querida, puedo confesarte que no era feliz. Puse todo mi empeño en ganarme el afecto de las dos niñas a las que debía enseñar, pero desde un principio parecí no gustarles, te aseguro que no puedo decirte el porqué. De su madre no tengo motivos de queja. Pero su abuela, que era quien gobernaba en realidad la casa, me hizo la vida imposible. Mi inexperiencia en la enseñanza era motivo de constantes comentarios por su parte y se me reprochaban las dificultades que tenía con las niñas como si fueran enteramente culpa mía. Te cuento esto para que no creas que lamento haber dejado mi empleo. Lejos de ello, cariño, me alegro de haber salido de aquella casa.

He ahorrado algo de dinero, Magdalen, y me gustaría mucho gastarlo en pasar unos cuantos días contigo. Mi corazón ansía ver a mi hermana, mis oídos se han cansado esperando oír el sonido de su voz. Una palabra tuya diciéndome dónde podemos encontrarnos es lo único que deseo. Piénsalo. Por favor, piénsalo.

No creas que estoy desanimada por este primer revés. Hay muchas personas buenas en el mundo y puede que alguna de ellas me dé trabajo la próxima vez. A menudo es muy difícil hallar el camino de la felicidad, más difícil, me inclino a creer, para las mujeres que para los hombres. Pero si lo intentamos con paciencia y durante el tiempo suficiente, lo alcanzamos al fin; si no en la Tierra, al menos en el Cielo. Creo que ahora mi camino es el que conduce a volver a verte. No lo olvides, cariño, la próxima vez que pienses en

NORAH

IV

DE LA SEÑORITA GARTH A MAGDALEN

Westmoreland House, 1 de julio

Mi querida Magdalen:

No debes temer inútiles protestas al ver mi letra. Te escribo esta carta con el único propósito de decirte algo que sé que tu hermana no te dirá *motu proprio*. Ella ignora por completo que te la escribo. Mantenla en la ignorancia, si deseas ahorrarle a ella una preocupación innecesaria y a mí, un apuro innecesario.

En la carta de Norah te dice sin duda que ha abandonado su colocación. Considero que es mi penoso deber añadir que ha sido por tu causa.

El asunto ocurrió de la forma siguiente. Los señores Wyatt, Pendril y Gwilt son los abogados del caballero en cuya familia estaba empleada Norah. Todos los socios conocían la vida que has elegido ya desde el mes de diciembre pasado. La persona contratada para seguirte la pista en York te descubrió actuando en público en Derby, y ese descubrimiento fue comunicado por el señor Wyatt al mencionado caballero hace unos días y en respuesta a sus indagaciones directas con respecto a ti. Su mujer y su madre (que vive con él) habían expresado el deseo de que efectuara esas indagaciones, pues las respuestas evasivas de Norah cuando le preguntaban por su hermana habían despertado sus sospechas. Demasiado bien conoces a Norah para echarle la culpa. Las evasivas eran la única salida que tu vida actual le ha dejado aparte de contestar directamente una falsedad.

Ese mismo día, las dos señoras de la familia, la mayor y la más joven, mandaron llamar a tu hermana y le dijeron que habían descubierto que eres actriz y que recorres el país de un lugar a otro con nombre supuesto. Fueron lo bastante justas para no culpar a Norah por ello; fueron lo bastante justas para admitir que su conducta había sido tan irreprochable como yo había garantizado que sería cuando le conseguí la colocación. Pero al mismo tiempo, para seguir aceptándola pusieron como condición categórica que jamás te permitiera visitas en su casa, ni encontrarte con ella y pasear con ella cuando estuviera atendiendo a las niñas. A tu hermana -que ha soportado pacientemente todas las dificultades que han caído sobre ella- le ofendió al instante el insulto que se te hacía. Dio aviso de que se marchaba en el acto. A esto siguieron unas fuertes palabras y abandonó la casa esa misma tarde.

No deseo acongojarte presentándote la pérdida de su colocación como un desastre. Norah no era tan feliz en ella como yo había esperado y creído que sería. Era imposible que yo supiera de antemano que las niñas eran ariscas e intratables, o que la madre del marido estaba acostumbrada a hacer notar su posición de dominio sobre todos los de la casa. Estoy dispuesta a reconocer que Norah está mejor sin ese empleo. Pero el daño no se detiene ahí. Por el contrario, por lo que sabemos tú y yo, el daño puede prolongarse. Lo que ha ocurrido en esta colocación puede ocurrir en otra. Tu estilo de vida, por pura que sea tu conducta -y te haré la justicia de creer que es pura-, es un modo de vida sospechoso para toda persona respetable. He vivido lo bastante en este mundo para saber que en nueve de cada diez mujeres inglesas el sentido del decoro no hace concesiones ni siente piedad. Las próximas personas que empleen a Norah pueden descubrirte, y quizá la próxima vez ella eche por la borda una colocación que ni siquiera estamos seguros de volver a encontrarle.

Lo someto a tu consideración. ¡Niña mía! No pienses que soy dura contigo. Mi celo pretende la tranquilidad de tu hermana. Si olvidas el pasado y vuelves, Magdalen, puedes confiar en que tu vieja institutriz también lo olvidará y te proporcionará el hogar que tu padre y tu madre le dieron en otro tiempo. Tu amiga siempre, querida mía,

HARRIET GARTH

V

DE FRANCIS CLARE, HIJO, A MAGDALEN

Shanghai, la China,

23 de abril de 1847

Mi querida Magdalen:

He dilatado la respuesta a tu carta como consecuencia del aturdido estado mental que me impedía escribirte. El impedimento persiste, pero me siento obligado a no demorarme más. Mi sentido del honor me fortalece para soportar el dolor de redactar esta carta.

Todas mis perspectivas en la China han tocado fondo. La firma a la que fui brutalmente expedido como si fuera una bala de mercancía ha agotado mi paciencia con una serie de mezquinos insultos, y mi amor propio me ha impelido a retirar mis servicios, los cuales no fueron valorados en su justa medida desde el comienzo. Mi regreso a Inglaterra en estas circunstancias es totalmente imposible. La crueldad con que se me ha tratado en mi propio país me impide sentir deseos de volver a él, aunque pudiera. Me propongo embarcar por estos mares en un navío mercante, en calidad de empleado mercantil, para abrirme camino por mí mismo, si puedo. Cómo terminará o qué me ocurrirá es más de lo que puedo decir. Poco importa lo que sea de mí. Soy un vagabundo y un exiliado, y todo por culpa de otros. El insensible deseo de deshacerse de mí que todos tenían en mi país ha logrado su objetivo. Se han librado de mí para siempre.

Sólo me queda un sacrificio más por hacer: el de mis sentimientos más profundos. Sin perspectiva alguna ante mí, sin la oportunidad de volver a casa, ¿qué esperanza puedo abrigar de cumplir con nuestro compromiso? ¡Ninguna! Un hombre más egoísta que yo podría mantenerte atada a ese compromiso; un hombre menos considerado que yo podría tenerte esperando durante años… y sin motivo después de todo. Pese a la crueldad con que han sido pisoteados, mis sentimientos son demasiado sensibles para permitirme hacer eso. Lo escribo con lágrimas en los ojos: no unas tu destino a un paria. Con estas desconsoladas líneas te libero de tu promesa. Nuestro compromiso ha llegado a su fin.

El único consuelo que me sostiene al decirte adiós es que ninguno de los dos tiene la culpa. Puede que tú obraras con debilidad bajo la influencia de mi padre, pero estoy seguro de que lo hiciste con la mejor intención. Nadie sabía cuáles serían las fatales consecuencias de alejarme de Inglaterra, salvo yo mismo, y yo no fui escuchado. Cedí ante mi padre, cedí ante ti, ¡y he aquí el resultado!

Mis agudos sufrimientos me impiden seguir escribiendo. ¡Ojalá no llegues a saber nunca lo que me ha costado renunciar a nuestro compromiso! Te ruego que no te eches la culpa. No es culpa tuya que otros hayan dirigido mal todas mis energías; no es culpa tuya que jamás haya tenido una oportunidad justa para medrar en la vida. Olvida a este pobre desventurado y abandonado, que susurra unas sinceras plegarias por tu felicidad, que siempre te deseará lo mejor y seguirá siendo tu amigo,

FRANCIS CLARE, HIJO

VI

DE FRANCIS CLARE, PADRE, A MAGDALEN

Siempre dije a tu pobre padre que mi hijo era un idiota, pero no he sabido que era un granuja hasta que llegó el correo de la China. Tengo razones para creer que ha abandonado su empleo en las más bochornosas circunstancias. Olvídate de él para siempre, como pienso hacer yo. Cuando tú y yo nos vimos por última vez, te comportaste correctamente conmigo en este asunto. Todo lo que ahora puedo decirte a mi vez, te lo digo. Amiga mía, lo siento por ti.

VII

DE LA SEÑORA WRAGGE A SU MARIDO

Querido señor por amor de Dios venga y ayúdenos Ella ha recibido una espantosa carta no sé de qué ayer pero la leyó en la cama y cuando he entrado con el desayuno la he encontrado muerta y si el médico no hubiera estado dos casas más allá nadie hubiera podido devolverla a la vida y se sienta con un aspecto terrible y no quiere hablar sus ojos me asustan así que tiemblo de los pies a la cabeza oh por favor venga pronto Tengo las cosas tan ordenadas como puedo y ella me gusta tanto y era tan buena conmigo y el casero dice que teme que se mate ojalá pudiera escribir correctamente pero tiemblo tanto que su obediente esposa matilda wragge perdone las faltas y le ruega de rodillas que venga y nos ayude el doctor un buen hombre escribirá unas líneas por miedo a que no entienda mi letra y quedo una vez más su obediente esposa matilda wragge.

Señor, me permito informarle de que fui llamado ayer a la casa de unos vecinos, en Vauxhall Walk, para atender a una señorita que había enfermado súbitamente. Con gran dificultad conseguí que volviera en sí de uno de los desmayos más obstinados que recuerdo haber visto en mi vida. Desde entonces no ha recaído, pero aparentemente pesa sobre su ánimo una terrible congoja que hasta el momento ha resultado imposible aliviar. Según me han informado, permanece sentada durante horas, muda y totalmente ajena a lo que ocurre en derredor, con una carta en la mano y sin permitir que nadie se la quite. Si continúa en este estado de postración, podrían derivarse graves consecuencias mentales; considero que es mi deber sugerir que intervenga algún pariente o familiar que tenga influencia suficiente para sacarla de él.

Su humilde servidor,

RICHARD JARVIS, M. R. C. S.

VIII

DE NORAH A MAGDALEN

¡Por amor de Dios, escríbeme unas líneas para decirme si aún estás en Birmingham y dónde puedo encontrarte allí! Acabo de recibir noticias del anciano señor Clare. ¡Oh, Magdalen, si no tienes piedad de ti misma, ten piedad de mí! La idea de saberte sola entre extraños, la idea de saberte con el corazón roto por ese horrible golpe no me abandona ni un solo instante. ¡No tengo palabras para expresar cuánto lo lamento! Cariño mío, recuerda tiempos mejores en nuestra casa antes de que ese cobarde villano te robara el corazón; recuerda los tiempos felices en Combe-Raven, cuando siempre estábamos juntas. ¡Oh, por favor, no me trates como a una extraña! Ahora estamos solas en el mundo. Déjame acudir a tu lado para consolarte; déjame ser más que una hermana para ti, si puedo. ¡Una línea, una sola línea para decirme dónde puedo encontrarte!

IX

DE MAGDALEN A NORAH

7 de julio

Mi queridísima Norah:

Todo lo que tu amor por mí pudiera desear, tu carta lo ha conseguido. Tú, y sólo tú has conseguido llegarme al corazón. Pude volver a pensar, pude volver a sentir después de leer lo que me habías escrito. Que esta seguridad calme tu inquietud. Mi espíritu vive y respira una vez más; estaba muerta hasta que recibí tu carta.

La conmoción que he sufrido ha dejado un extraño sosiego tras de sí. Me siento como si me hubiera separado de mi antiguo yo, como si las esperanzas, tan caras para mí en otra época, hubieran vuelto a algún tiempo pasado del que ahora estoy muy alejada. Puedo contemplar el naufragio de mi vida con más calma, Norah, de la que podrías tener tú si volviéramos a estar juntas. Puedo confiar ya en mí misma para escribir a Frank.

Querida mía, creo que ninguna mujer llega a saber hasta qué punto se ha entregado al hombre al que ama hasta que ese hombre abusa de ella. ¿Podrás compadecer mi debilidad si te confieso haber sentido una punzada en el corazón al leer esa parte de tu carta en la que llamas a Frank cobarde y villano? Nadie puede despreciarme tanto por ello como me desprecio yo misma. Soy como un perro que vuelve arrastrándose y lame la mano del amo que lo ha golpeado. Pero es así -no se lo confesaría a nadie más que a ti-, lo cierto, lo cierto es que es así. Frank me ha engañado y me ha abandonado; me ha escrito una cruel despedida, ¡pero no le llames villano! Si se arrepintiera y volviera a mí, antes moriría que casarme con él, ¡pero me hiere ver la palabra cobarde escrita contra él de tu mano! Si su voluntad es débil, ¿quién la puso a prueba por encima de lo que podía soportar? ¿Crees que esto habría ocurrido si Michael Vanstone no nos hubiera robado lo que es nuestro, obligando así a Frank a marcharse a la China? Dentro de una semana, el año de espera habría llegado a su fin y yo sería la esposa de Frank, si no me hubieran despojado de mi dote.

Dirás, después de lo ocurrido, que ha sido mejor que me librara de él. ¡Cariño mío! Hay algo perverso en mi corazón que responde: ¡no! Mejor haber sido la desventurada esposa de Frank que la mujer libre que soy.

No le he escrito. No me ha enviado dirección alguna a la que escribir, aunque quisiera hacerlo. Pero no quiero. Esperaré, antes de enviarle mi despedida. Si llega el día en que disponga de la fortuna que mi padre prometió que yo habría de aportarle, ¿sabes qué haría con ella? Se la enviaría entera como venganza por su carta, como mi última palabra de despedida al hombre que me ha abandonado. ¡Espero vivir para ver ese día! Espero vivir ahora con la esperanza de que lleguen para ti tiempos mejores, Norah, pues es la única esperanza que me queda. Cuando pienso en tus penurias, casi noto afluir de nuevo las lágrimas a mis cansados ojos. Casi creo haber vuelto a mi antiguo yo.

¿No me considerarás insensible e ingrata si te digo que aún debemos esperar un poco para vernos? Quiero estar en mejores condiciones para verte de las que estoy ahora. Quiero alejarme aún más de Frank y acercarme más a ti. ¿Son éstas razones convincentes? No lo sé, no me pidas razones. Recibe el beso que he puesto para ti en el pequeño círculo dibujado en el papel, y que ese beso nos una por el momento hasta que te escriba de nuevo. Adiós, cariño mío. Mi corazón te es fiel, Norah, pero no me atrevo a verte todavía.

MAGDALEN

X

DE MAGDALEN A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

Mi querida señorita Garth:

He tardado mucho en contestar a su carta, pero usted sabe lo que ha ocurrido y me perdonará.

Todo lo que tengo que decir puede expresarse en unas cuantas palabras. Puede usted confiar en que jamás volveré a enemistarme con el sentido general del decoro. Mi conocimiento del mundo ha aumentado lo suficiente para hacer de él mi cómplice en la próxima ocasión. Norah no volverá a dejar otra colocación por mi causa. Mi vida como actriz ha terminado. Bien sabe Dios que fue de lo más inocente -puede que viva, y usted también, para lamentar el día en que la abandoné-, pero no regresaré a ella jamás. Me ha dejado, como me ha dejado Frank, como me han dejado mis mejores pensamientos, excepto los que dedico a Norah.

¡Basta ya de mí! ¿Le cuento una noticia que alegrará esta triste carta? El señor Michael Vanstone ha muerto, y el señor Noel Vanstone ha entrado en posesión de mi fortuna y la de Norah. Es absolutamente digno de su herencia. En su lugar, nos hubiera arruinado de la misma forma en que lo hizo su padre.

No tengo nada más que decir que pueda interesarle saber. No se aflija por mí. Intento recobrar los ánimos. Intento olvidar a la pobre muchacha engañada que cometió la estupidez de enamorarse de Frank en los viejos tiempos de Combe-Raven. Algunas veces siento una angustia que me dice que esa muchacha no será olvidada, pero no ocurre a menudo.

Fue muy amable cuando escribió a una criatura tan perdida como yo y firmó: «Tu amiga, siempre». ¡«Siempre» es una palabra arriesgada, mi vieja y querida institutriz! Me pregunto si alguna vez deseará no recordarla. Aun en ese caso, no cambiará la gratitud que siempre sentiré por las molestias que se tomó conmigo cuando era una niña. No he sabido corresponder a esas molestias; no he sabido después corresponder a su bondad hacia mí. Le pido que me perdone y me compadezca. Lo mejor que puede hacer por las dos es olvidarme. Suya con afecto,

MAGDALEN

P. S. Abro el sobre para añadir una línea. ¡Por amor de Dios, no enseñe esta carta a Norah!

XI

DE MAGDALEN AL CAPITÁN WRAGGE

Vauxhall Walk, 17 de julio

Si no me equivoco, acordamos que le escribiría a Birmingham tan pronto como me serenara lo bastante para pensar en el futuro. Por fin he vuelto a la normalidad y puedo aceptar ahora los servicios que me ofreció sin reservas.

Le ruego que me perdone por la manera en que le recibí cuando llegó a esta casa tras enterarse de la noticia de mi súbita enfermedad. Era totalmente incapaz de dominarme; me aquejaba una angustia que me privó por un momento de mis sentidos. No hago más que reconocer sus merecimientos al agradecerle ahora que me tratara con gran indulgencia en unos momentos en que la indulgencia era misericordia.

Explicaré lo que deseo que haga con la mayor sencillez y brevedad posibles.

En primer lugar, le pido que se deshaga (con la mayor discreción) de todo el vestuario utilizado en el espectáculo teatral. He terminado con nuestras representaciones para siempre y deseo librarme de cuanto pudiera relacionarme accidentalmente con ellas en el futuro. Adjunto la llave de mi baúl a esta carta.

El otro baúl, que contiene mis vestidos, tendrá usted la amabilidad de enviármelo a esta casa. No le pido que lo traiga usted mismo porque tengo una misión mucho más importante que encomendarle.

Con referencia a la nota que me dejó antes de su partida, he llegado a la conclusión de que ha seguido usted la pista al señor Noel Vanstone desde Vauxhall Walk a la residencia que ahora ocupa. Si lo ha descubierto ya -y si está convencido de no haber atraído la atención de la señora Lecount ni la de su amo-, deseo que disponga inmediatamente todo lo necesario para que yo pueda residir (con usted y la señora Wragge) en la misma ciudad o pueblo en la que haya fijado su domicilio el señor Noel Vanstone. Prácticamente innecesario es que le diga que escribo esto con la impresión de que, cualquiera que sea el lugar en el que ahora vive, se habrá instalado en él por poco tiempo.

Si consigue usted hallar una casita amueblada para mí con una condición, a saber, la de que se alquile por meses, alquílela por un mes para empezar. Diga que es para su esposa, su sobrina y usted mismo, y utilice el nombre falso que le apetezca, siempre que sea un nombre que pueda desafiar las preguntas más suspicaces. Confío en su experiencia en estos asuntos. El secreto de quiénes somos en realidad debe guardarse como si nos fuera en ello la vida.

Todos los gastos en los que pueda incurrir para llevar a cabo mis deseos le serán retribuidos inmediatamente. Si encuentra con facilidad el tipo de casa que quiero, no es necesario que regrese a Londres para recogernos. Podemos encontrarnos allí tan pronto como sepamos adonde ir. La casa debe ser absolutamente respetable y estar razonablemente cerca de la residencia actual del señor Noel Vanstone, sea cual sea.

Me permitirá usted que guarde silencio con respecto al propósito que me inspira. No quiero arriesgarme a poner tal explicación por escrito.

Cuando se hayan realizado todos los preparativos oirá lo que me propongo hacer de mis propios labios, y espero que usted me conteste sinceramente a su vez si me prestará o no la ayuda que quiero, en las mejores condiciones que le pueda ofrecer.

Una cosa más antes de sellar esta carta.

Si después de haber alquilado la casa y antes de que nos reunamos con usted se le presentara la oportunidad de intercambiar unas cuantas palabras corteses con el señor Noel Vanstone o la señora Lecount, aprovéchela. Es muy importante, para lo que ahora me propongo, que trabemos relación con ellos como resultado puramente accidental de nuestra vecindad. Quiero que allane usted el camino con ese fin, si puede, antes de que lleguemos la señora Wragge y yo. Por favor, no desperdicie ninguna oportunidad de observar a la señora Lecount; sobre todo, con sumo cuidado. Toda la ayuda que pueda prestarme al principio para poner una venda sobre los penetrantes ojos de esa mujer será la más valiosa que haya recibido de usted.

No hay necesidad de que responda a esta carta de inmediato, a menos que mi impresión de lo que ha conseguido usted desde que abandonó Londres sea errónea. He pagado una semana más de alojamiento y puedo esperar hasta que me mande las noticias que deseo recibir. Puede estar usted seguro de contar con mi paciencia en el futuro en todas las circunstancias posibles. Mis caprichos se han terminado y mi violento temperamento ha puesto a prueba su indulgencia por última vez.

MAGDALEN

XII

DEL CAPITÁN WRAGGE A MAGDALEN

Villa North Shingles, Aldborough, Suffolk,

22 de julio

Mi querida niña:

Su carta me ha encantado y conmovido. Sus excusas me han llegado directas al corazón y su confianza en mis humildes habilidades han seguido la misma dirección. El pulso del antiguo miliciano late con orgullo al pensar en la confianza que ha depositado en él y se compromete a merecerla. No se sorprenda ante este cordial arrebato. Todas las naturalezas entusiastas deben explotar de vez en cuando y mi forma de explosión son las palabras.

Todo lo que me pidió que hiciera, hecho está. La casa está alquilada, el nombre decidido, y conozco personalmente a la señora Lecount. Tras leer esta afirmación general, le interesará naturalmente entrar en conocimiento de los detalles correspondientes. Aquí los tiene, a su disposición:

El día después de dejarla en Londres seguí la pista al señor Noel Vanstone hasta esta pequeña y agradable población costera. Una de las innumerables gangas de su padre era una casa en Aldborough, una estación balnearia en alza; de lo contrario el señor Michael Vanstone no hubiera invertido ni un penique en ella. En esa casa, el pequeño y despreciable avaro que vivía sin pagar alquiler en Londres vive ahora en la costa de Suffolk, también sin pagar alquiler. Se ha instalado en su residencia actual para pasar el verano y el otoño, y usted y la señora Wragge no tienen más que reunirse conmigo y se encontrarán instaladas en esta elegante villa a cinco puertas de él. He conseguido toda la casa por tres guineas a la semana, con la opción de permanecer en ella hasta final de otoño al mismo precio. En una estación balnearia de moda cualquier residencia semejante hubiera sido barata por el doble de dinero.

Nuestro nuevo nombre ha sido elegido con la cautela que me sugería. Mis libros -espero que no haya olvidado mis libros- contienen, bajo el encabezamiento «Pellejos en los que meterse», una lista de individuos retirados del escenario del mundo con cuyos nombres, familias y circunstancias estoy muy familiarizado. En el ejercicio de mi profesión me he visto obligado a meterme en alguno de estos pellejos en períodos anteriores de mi carrera. Otros se hallan todavía en estado de nuevas vestiduras y aún están por probar. El pellejo que mejor nos sentará cubría originalmente los cuerpos de una familia llamada Bygrave. Yo me hallo en el pellejo del señor Bygrave en estos momentos. Y nos sienta perfectamente, sin una sola arruga. Si me hace usted el favor de deslizarse en el pellejo de la señorita Bygrave (nombre de pila, Susan), y si quiere meter luego a la señora Wragge -como sea: de cabeza si le apetece- en el de la señora Bygrave (nombre de pila, Julia), la transformación será completa. Permítame informarle de que soy su tío paterno. Mi respetable hermano se estableció en el comercio de la caoba y el palo campeche en Belize, Honduras. Allí murió, y está enterrado en el lado sudoeste del cementerio local con un bonito monumento de madera autóctona tallada por un artista negro autodidacta. Diecinueve meses después, su viuda murió de apoplejía en una pensión de Cheltenham. Tenía fama de ser la mujer más corpulenta de Inglaterra, y la habían acomodado en la planta baja de la casa a consecuencia de la dificultad de subirla y bajarla por las escaleras. Usted es su única hija; ha estado a mi cargo desde el triste suceso de Cheltenham; cumplirá veintiún años el próximo dos de agosto y, excluyendo la

corpulencia, es la viva imagen de su madre. La molesto con estas muestras de mis profundos conocimientos sobre su nuevo pellejo familiar para tranquilizarla con respecto a futuras preguntas. Confíe en mí y en mis libros para satisfacerlas por numerosas que sean. Mientras tanto, anote su nuevo nombre y dirección y vea qué le parecen: «Señor Bygrave, señora Bygrave, señorita Bygrave; Villa North Shingles, Aldborough». ¡A fe mía que se lee muy bien!

El último detalle que tengo que comunicarle se refiere a mi relación con la señora Lecount.

Nos conocimos ayer en la tienda de ultramarinos. Aguzando el oído, descubrí que la señora Lecount quería un tipo de té en particular que el hombre no tenía y que no creía que pudiera obtenerse más cerca que en Ipswich. Al instante vi mi oportunidad para trabar conocimiento con el insignificante costo de un viaje a esa floreciente ciudad. «Tengo un asunto que atender hoy en Ipswich», dije, «y me propongo regresar a Aldborough (si consigo llegar a tiempo) esta noche. Le ruego que me permita llevarme su pedido de té y traerlo con mis otros paquetes.» La señora Lecount rehusó educadamente causarme esa molestia; yo insistí cortésmente en tomármela. Trabamos conversación. No es necesario molestarla a usted con nuestra charla. El resultado de ésta es, en mi opinión, que el punto flaco de la señora Lecount, si es que tiene alguno, es su afición a la ciencia inculcada por su difunto marido, el profesor. Creo que veo ahí una posibilidad de granjearme sus simpatías y arrojar un poco de polvo necesario en esos hermosos ojos negros que tiene. Guiándome por esta idea, cuando compré en Ipswich el té para la señora compré también por mi cuenta ese famoso manual de conocimientos, los *Scientific Dialogues* de Joyce. Poseyendo como poseo una memoria rápida y una confianza ilimitada en mí mismo, me propongo inflar en secreto mi nuevo pellejo con la mayor cantidad de ciencia a la medida que pueda contener y presentar al señor Bygrave a la atención de la señora Lecount en el papel del hombre más culto que haya conocido desde la muerte del profesor. La necesidad de vendar los ojos a esa mujer (usando su admirable expresión) es tan evidente para mí como lo es para usted. Si ha de hacerse del modo que yo propongo, puede estar tranquila; Wragge, inflado por Joyce, es el hombre indicado.

Dispone usted ahora de todo mi arsenal de noticias. ¿Soy o no soy digno de su confianza? No diré nada de mi acuciante ansiedad por conocer cuáles son realmente sus propósitos; esa ansiedad será aplacada cuando nos encontremos. Mi querida niña, jamás había anhelado tanto exprimir pecuniariamente a una criatura humana como anhelo exprimir al señor Noel Vanstone. No digo más. *Verbum sap.* Disculpe la pedantería de la cita latina y considéreme enteramente suyo,

HORATIO WRAGGE

P. S. Espero instrucciones, como me pedía. Sólo tiene que decirme si debo regresar a Londres a fin de acompañarlas hasta aquí o si debo aguardar a recibirlas. La casa está en perfecto orden, el tiempo es delicioso y el mar está tan liso como el delantal de la señora Lecount. Acaba de pasar junto a la ventana y hemos intercambiado inclinaciones de cabeza. Una mujer astuta, mi querida Magdalen, pero puede que Joyce y yo juntos seamos demasiado para ella.

XIII

EXTRACTO DEL EAST SUFFOLK ARGUS

Aldborough. Notificamos con placer la llegada de visitantes a esta saludable y afamada estación balnearia, con lo que la temporada da así comienzo más pronto de lo habitual en el presente año. *Esto Perpetua* es cuanto tenemos que decir.

Lista de visitantes. Llegadas desde nuestro último número. Villa North Shingles: señora Bygrave, señorita Bygrave.

LA CUARTA ESCENA

Aldborough, Suffolk

CAPÍTULO I

El espectáculo más notable que ofrece a un forastero la costa de Suffolk es la extraordinaria indefensión de la tierra frente a las incursiones del mar.

En Aldborough, como en cualquier otro lugar a lo largo de esta costa, las tradiciones locales han sido en su mayor parte ahogadas literalmente. El emplazamiento de la antigua población, un puerto populoso y floreciente en otro tiempo, ha desaparecido casi por completo en el mar. El océano Alemán ha engullido casas, mercados, malecones y avenidas y, para consumar su labor de devastación, no hace más de ochenta años que las implacables aguas se cerraron sobre la casa del maestro salador, famosa ahora únicamente en el recuerdo como lugar de nacimiento del poeta Crabbe.

Empujados año tras año por el avance de las olas, los habitantes han retrocedido en el presente siglo hasta el último pedazo de tierra lo bastante firme aún para poder construir sobre ella: una franja de tierra encerrada entre la marisma de un lado, y el mar, del otro. Allí -confiando su seguridad futura a ciertas dunas que las caprichosas olas han levantado para animarlas- las gentes de Aldborough han establecido su pequeña y singular estación balnearia. El primer fragmento de sus posesiones terrenales es un dique natural de guijarros de escasa altura, coronado por un paseo público que discurre paralelo al mar. Bordeando este paseo, las villas del moderno Aldborough forman una línea desigual: son pequeñas casas elegantes, rodeadas en su mayoría de jardines propios, que ostentan aquí y allá, como adornos horticulturales, mascarones de proa de mirada fija, que hacen las veces de estatuas entre las flores. Contemplado desde el bajo nivel en el que se hallan estas villas y en ciertas condiciones atmosféricas, el mar parece más alto que la tierra; los barcos de cabotaje que por allí pasan cobran proporciones gigantescas y parecen estar a una distancia alarmantemente próxima a las ventanas. Mezclados entre las casas de mayor calidad, hay edificios de otras formas y períodos. En una dirección, el diminuto ayuntamiento del antiguo Aldborough -en otro tiempo centro del puerto y de la villa hoy desaparecidos- se halla ahora delante de las villas modernas cerca de la orilla del mar. En otro punto, un observatorio de madera, coronado por el mascarón de proa de un navío ruso naufragado, se eleva muy por encima de las casas vecinas y deja ver a través de su escotilla, sentados en el último piso, a hombres graves con ropas oscuras siempre ojo avizor; son los prácticos de Aldborough mirando desde su torre en busca de barcos necesitados de ayuda. Detrás de la hilera de edificios entremezclados de tan curiosa manera, discurre la única calle de trazado irregular de la población, con las sólidas casas de sus prácticos, sus desmoronados almacenes portuarios y sus tiendas variopintas. Hacia el extremo norte, la calle linda con la única eminencia visible en toda la llanura marismeña: una baja colina poblada de árboles sobre la que se yergue la iglesia. En el extremo opuesto, la calle conduce a una atalaya abandonada y al triste y alejado suburbio de Slaughden, entre el río Alde y el mar. Éstas son las características principales de este pequeño y curioso puesto avanzado de las costas inglesas, tal como se ven en el momento presente.

En una cálida y nubosa tarde de julio, y en el segundo día transcurrido desde que había escrito a Magdalen, el capitán Wragge cruzó la verja de Villa North Shingles para ir a esperar la diligencia que entonces conectaba Aldborough con el ferrocarril de los condados del este. Llegó a la posada principal cuando la diligencia se detenía ante ella, y se hallaba presto en la puerta para recibir a Magdalen y a la señora Wragge cuando

éstas se apearon del vehículo.

El recibimiento que el capitán dedicó a su esposa no se caracterizó por una innecesaria pérdida de tiempo. Le miró los pies con desconfianza, se alzó de puntillas, le enderezó el sombrero con un fuerte tirón, susurró con tono audible: «Refrene su lengua» y se apartó de ella sin prestarle por el momento más atención. Su bienvenida a Magdalen, empezando con el habitual derroche de palabras, se interrumpió en medio de la primera frase. El capitán Wragge era muy buen observador e instantáneamente vio algo en la expresión y las maneras de su antigua pupila que denotaba un importante cambio.

Su rostro tenía una serena compostura que, excepto cuando hablaba, le daba un aspecto inerte y frío como de mármol. Su voz era más reposada y uniforme, sus ojos tranquilos, caminaba más despacio que antes. Cuando sonreía, la sonrisa aparecía y desaparecía súbitamente y mostraba una pequeña contracción nerviosa en una de las comisuras de la boca que antes no era visible. Se mostró sumamente paciente con la señora Wragge, trató al capitán con una cortesía y una consideración enteramente nuevas en la experiencia que tenía de ella, pero no se interesaba por nada. Las pintorescas tiendecitas de la callejuela, el mar que se cernía, tan próximo, sobre ellos, el antiguo ayuntamiento junto a la playa, los prácticos, los pescadores, los barcos que pasaban: todos estos objetos los observó con tanta indiferencia como si conociera Aldborough desde la infancia, y cuando el capitán se detuvo en la verja del jardín de North Shingles y le mostró la nueva casa con aire triunfal, apenas le echó una ojeada. La primera pregunta que hizo estaba relacionada, no con su nueva residencia, sino con la de Noel Vanstone.

- ¿Vive cerca de nosotros? -preguntó, traicionando sus emociones por primera y única vez.

El capitán Wragge respondió señalando la quinta villa a partir de North Shingles, en el lado de Aldborough que limitaba con Slaughden. De repente, Magdalen se alejó de la verja cuando él le indicó el emplazamiento y echó a andar sola para ver la casa más de cerca.

El capitán Wragge la siguió con la mirada y meneó la cabeza, descontento.

- ¿Puedo hablar ahora? -inquirió una voz dócil a su espalda, pronunciando las palabras respetuosamente veinticinco centímetros por encima de su sombrero de paja.

El capitán giró en redondo y se encaró con su mujer. La perplejidad más que ordinaria que era visible en su rostro sugirió al capitán que Magdalen no había llevado a cabo las instrucciones de su carta y que la señora Wragge había llegado a Aldborough sin el debido conocimiento de la transformación total que habían de sufrir su nombre y su identidad. La necesidad de despejar esta duda era demasiado grave para tomársela a la ligera, y el capitán Wragge comenzó el interrogatorio pertinente sin tardanza.

- Enderécese y escuche -empezó-. Tengo que hacerle una pregunta. ¿Sabe en qué pellejo se halla en este momento? ¿Sabe que está usted muerta y enterrada en Londres y que se ha alzado de las cenizas de la señora Wragge como un ave fénix? ¡No! Es evidente que no. Esto es absolutamente vergonzoso. ¿Cómo se llama?

- Matilda -respondió la señora Wragge en un estado de profundísimo desconcierto.

- ¡Nada de eso! -exclamó el capitán airadamente-. ¿Cómo osa decirme que se llama Matilda? Se llama Julia. ¿Quién soy yo? ¡Sostenga derecho ese cesto de emparedados o lo arrojaré al mar! ¿Quién soy yo?

- No lo sé -dijo la señora Wragge esta vez, refugiándose dócilmente en la negación.

- ¡Siéntese! -dijo su marido señalando el bajo muro del jardín de Villa North Shingles-. ¡Más a la derecha! ¡Más aún! Ya vale. ¿No lo sabe? -repitió el capitán encarándose severamente con su mujer así que pudo situar su rostro al nivel del de ella por el procedimiento de sentarla-. Que no vuelva a oírle decir eso una segunda vez. No quiero que una mujer que no sabe quién soy me afeite mañana por la mañana. ¡Míreme! Más a

la izquierda, más aún. Ya vale. ¿Quién soy yo? Soy el señor Bygrave, nombre de pila, Thomas. ¿Quién es usted? Es la señora Bygrave, nombre de pila, Julia. ¿Quién es esa señorita que ha viajado con usted desde Londres? Esa señorita es la señorita Bygrave, nombre de pila, Susan. ¡Repítamelo todo al instante, como el Catecismo! ¿Cómo se llama usted?

- ¡Tenga piedad de mi pobre cabeza! -suplicó la señora Wragge-. ¡Oh, por favor, tenga piedad de mi pobre cabeza hasta que salga de ella la diligencia!

- No la altere -dijo Magdalen, que había vuelto en ese instante-. Lo aprenderá en su momento. Entremos en la casa.

El capitán Wragge meneó su precavida cabeza una vez más.

- Empezamos mal -dijo, con menos cortesía de la habitual-. La estupidez de mi mujer se interpone ya en nuestro camino.

Entraron en la casa. Las disposiciones del capitán satisficieron plenamente a Magdalen; aceptó la habitación que le había destinado, aprobó a la criada que había contratado, se presentó a tomar el té cuando la llamaron; pero seguía sin mostrar el más mínimo interés por el nuevo lugar. Poco después de que se quitara la mesa, y aunque aún era de día, se apoderó de la señora Wragge la somnolencia acostumbrada que la atacaba después de un esfuerzo de cualquier tipo. Así pues, recibió la orden de su marido de abandonar la habitación (asegurándose de que llevaba los zapatos bien calzados) y meterse (estrictamente en el personaje de la señora Bygrave) en la cama. Tan pronto como se quedaron solos, el capitán clavó en Magdalen una mirada penetrante y aguardó a que le dirigiera la palabra. Ella no dijo nada. Entonces el capitán se aventuró a iniciar la conversación con una pregunta cortés sobre el estado de su salud.

- Parece fatigada -señaló con sus modales más zalameros-. Me temo que el viaje ha sido excesivo para usted.

- No -replicó ella mirando por la ventana con nerviosismo-. No estoy más fatigada de lo habitual. Ahora siempre estoy cansada, cansada al acostarme, cansada al levantarme. Si desea oír esta noche lo que tengo que decirle, estoy dispuesta a hacerlo. ¿Podemos ir afuera? Aquí hace mucho calor y el murmullo de las voces de esos hombres es insoportable. -Señaló a través de la ventana a un grupo de barqueros que ganduleaban como sólo pueden hacerlo los hombres de mar, apoyados en el muro del jardín-. ¿No hay ningún lugar tranquilo en este miserable lugar? -preguntó, exasperada-. ¿No podríamos respirar un poco de aire fresco y evitar que nos molesten unos desconocidos?

- La soledad es perfecta a media hora de paseo desde la casa -contestó el capitán rápidamente.

- Muy bien. Salgamos, pues.

Con un suspiro de cansancio, Magdalen cogió su sombrero de paja y su ligero pañuelo de muselina de la mesa auxiliar donde los había arrojado al llegar y encabezó con apatía la marcha hacia la puerta. El capitán Wragge la siguió hasta la verja del jardín y allí le detuvo una nueva idea.

- Perdóneme -dijo en un susurro-. En el actual estado de ignorancia en que se halla mi mujer con respecto a quién es ella, sería mejor que no la dejáramos sola en la casa con una criada nueva. Yo mismo la encerraré con llave por si se despierta antes de que volvamos. Lo que bien se ata nunca se pierde, ¡ya conoce el proverbio! No tardo nada.

El capitán se apresuró a entrar en la casa y Magdalen se sentó en el muro del jardín para aguardar su regreso.

Apenas se había instalado en esa posición cuando dos caballeros que caminaban juntos, y a los que antes no había visto acercarse por el paseo, pasaron cerca de ella.

El atuendo de uno de los dos desconocidos delataba su condición de clérigo. Más difícil

era distinguir la condición social de su compañero a simple vista. Seguramente un observador experimentado hubiera hallado suficientes detalles en su aspecto, sus maneras y sus andares para demostrar que era marino. Se trataba de un hombre en la flor de la vida, alto, delgado y musculoso, con el rostro quemado por el sol y las primeras canas en los cabellos negros, con los ojos oscuros, profundos e insondables, los ojos de un hombre con una voluntad férrea y acostumbrado a mandar. Cuando él y su amigo pasaron por delante de donde estaba sentada Magdalen, fue el que la tuvo más cerca, y la miró sorprendiéndose súbitamente de su belleza, con una admiración franca y sin disimulo, cuya sinceridad era demasiado obvia y demasiado espontánea para que ofendiera por insolente. Sin embargo, en el estado de ánimo en que se encontraba, a Magdalen la ofendió. Notó que los resueltos ojos negros de aquel hombre la penetraban con una brusquedad eléctrica y, frunciendo el entrecejo, volvió la cabeza para mirar hacia la casa.

Inmediatamente volvió de nuevo la cabeza para ver si él había seguido andando. El hombre había avanzado unos cuantos metros, era evidente que luego se había detenido, y se hallaba en aquel momento en el acto mismo de volverse para mirarla una vez más. Su compañero, el clérigo, percatándose de que Magdalen parecía molesta, lo cogió por el brazo con familiaridad y, medio en serio medio en broma, le obligó a seguir caminando. Ambos desaparecieron por la esquina de la siguiente casa. Al dar la vuelta, el marino tostado por el sol detuvo a su compañero en dos ocasiones y en dos ocasiones miró hacia atrás.

- ¿Un amigo? -inquirió el capitán Wragge, que acababa de volver en aquel preciso instante.

- Desde luego que no -contestó ella-. Un completo desconocido. Me ha mirado del modo más impertinente. ¿Vive aquí?

- Lo averiguaré en un momento -dijo el dócil capitán, acercándose al grupo de barqueros para lanzar sus preguntas a diestro y siniestro con la soltura que le caracterizaba. Regresó al cabo de unos minutos con un completo arsenal de información. El clérigo era muy conocido como párroco de un lugar situado a unos cuantos kilómetros hacia el interior. El hombre moreno que lo acompañaba era el hermano de su mujer, capitán de fragata de la marina mercante. Se le suponía invitado en casa de sus parientes únicamente durante el corto espacio de tiempo que precedía a un nuevo viaje. El clérigo se apellidaba Strickland y el capitán de fragata, Kirke; eso era todo lo que sabían los barqueros.

- No importa quiénes son -dijo Magdalen con indiferencia-. La grosería de ese hombre sólo me ha molestado en ese momento. Olvidémoslo. Tengo otras cosas en que pensar, y usted también. ¿Dónde está ese solitario paseo que ha mencionado antes? ¿En qué dirección?

El capitán señaló en dirección sur, hacia Slaughden, y le ofreció su brazo.

Magdalen dudó antes de aceptarlo. Sus ojos se desviaron interrogativamente hacia la casa de Noel Vanstone. Éste se hallaba en el jardín, paseándose de un lado a otro por la pequeña extensión de césped con la cabeza bien alta, discretamente atendido por la señora Lecount, que llevaba el abanico verde de su señor. Viéndolo, Magdalen se cogió inmediatamente del brazo derecho del capitán Wragge para situarse del lado del jardín cuando pasaran por delante.

- Nuestros vecinos van a vernos. Lo menos que puede hacer su sobrina es cogerse de su brazo -dijo Magdalen con una agria carcajada-. ¡Vamos! Adelante.

- Nos están mirando -susurró el capitán-. ¿La presento a la señora Lecount?

- Esta noche no -respondió Magdalen-. Primero espere a oír lo que quiero decirle.

Pasaron junto al muro del jardín. El capitán Wragge se quitó el sombrero con un pequeño floreo y recibió un cortés asentimiento de la señora Lecount como respuesta. Magdalen vio que el ama de llaves inspeccionaba su rostro, su figura y su atuendo con

ese interés reticente y esa curiosidad recelosa que sienten las mujeres al observarse unas a otras. Cuando pasaron la casa, la voz aguda de Noel Vanstone llegó hasta Magdalen atravesando la quietud del atardecer.

- Una hermosa joven, Lecount -le oyó decir-. Usted sabe que tengo buen ojo para ese tipo de cosas. ¡Una hermosa joven!

Cuando tales palabras fueron pronunciadas, el capitán Wragge miró a su compañera con repentina sorpresa. La mano de Magdalen temblaba como una hoja sobre su brazo y ella cerraba los labios en una expresión de mudo dolor.

Lentamente y en silencio siguieron caminando hasta llegar al límite sur de las casas y se adentraron en una zona más agreste de guijarros y hierba seca: el desolado término de Aldborough, el solitario inicio de Slaughden.

Era una tarde desapacible y sin viento. Hacia el este se hallaba la majestuosidad gris del mar, aquietado por aquella calma chicha; la línea del horizonte se fundía en el monótono cielo brumoso; los barcos aparecían sombríos e inmóviles en el agua inmóvil. Hacia el sur, el alto escollo del dique marino y el círculo macizo y lúgubre de la atalaya, elevada sobre su montículo de hierba, ocultaban la visión de lo que había más allá. Hacia el oeste, un pálido rayo del sol poniente atravesaba con rojo resplandor el triste cielo, ennegrecía los árboles que bordeaban los lejanos límites de la gran marisma del interior y convertía sus relucientes charcas de agua en charcas de sangre. Más cercana a la vista, la lenta corriente del río Alde, producto de la marea, se retiraba silenciosamente de las orillas fangosas; y, más cerca aún, se hallaba el pequeño puerto perdido de Slaughden, solitario y humilde, con sus embarcaderos abandonados y sus almacenes de maderas podridas, y sus escasos barcos de cabotaje varados en la orilla cenagosa del río. No se oían las olas rompiendo en la playa, no era audible el borboteo del agua en el arroyo perezoso. De vez en cuando, se alzaba el grito de una gaviota desde la región de la marisma y, a intervalos, desde las granjas del lejano yermo, el débil son de los cuernos que llamaban al ganado viajaba como un lamento fúnebre en medio de la calma del ocaso.

Magdalen retiró la mano del brazo del capitán y le precedió en dirección al montículo de la atalaya.

- Estoy cansada de andar -dijo-. Parémonos aquí a descansar.

Se sentó en la pendiente y, apoyándose en un codo, arrancó maquinalmente las matas de hierba que crecían bajo su mano y las esparció en el aire. Tras dedicarse unos minutos a esta silenciosa ocupación, se volvió hacia el capitán Wragge de repente.

- ¿Le sorprendo? -preguntó con una alarmante brusquedad-. ¿Me encuentra cambiada?

El fino tacto del capitán le hizo ver que había llegado el momento de ser franco con ella y reservar su retórica para una ocasión más apropiada.

- Ya que me lo pregunta, le contestaré -dijo-. Sí, la encuentro cambiada.

Magdalen arrancó otra mata de hierba.

- Supongo que adivina la razón -dijo.

El capitán tuvo la sensatez de guardar silencio. Respondió asintiendo.

- He perdido el amor propio -prosiguió Magdalen, arrancando las matas de hierba cada vez más deprisa-. Decir eso no es decir mucho quizá, pero puede que le ayude a comprenderme. En otro tiempo hubiera preferido morir antes que hacer ciertas cosas; sólo de pensarlo se me hubiera helado la sangre. Ahora ya no me importa si las hago o no. Yo no significo nada para mí misma; me intereso tan poco por mí misma como por estos montones de hierba. Supongo que he perdido algo. ¿El qué? ¿El corazón? ¿La conciencia? No lo sé. ¿Lo sabe usted? ¡Qué tonterías estoy diciendo! ¿A quién le importa lo que haya perdido? Ya no está, punto final. Supongo que mi aspecto externo es lo

mejor de mí; en cualquier caso, eso permanece. No he perdido mi belleza, ¿verdad? ¡Ya!, ¡ya!, no es necesario que conteste; no se moleste en hacerme cumplidos. Ya me han admirado bastante por hoy. Primero el marino y luego el señor Noel Vanstone, ¡sin duda esto ha de satisfacer la vanidad de cualquier mujer! ¿Tengo algún derecho a llamarme mujer? Quizá no, sólo soy una joven que aún no ha cumplido los veinte. ¡Oh, yo me siento como si tuviera cuarenta! -Lanzó las últimas briznas de hierba a los cuatro vientos y, dándole la espalda al capitán, dejó caer la cabeza hasta que la mejilla tocó el terraplén de hierba-. Tiene un tacto suave y agradable -dijo, arrimándose al suelo con una ternura desesperada y horrible de ver-. No me rechaza. ¡Madre Tierra! ¡La única madre que me queda!

El capitán Wragge la contempló con mudo asombro. La experiencia de la humanidad que él poseía era incapaz de sondear hasta sus profundidades el terrible abandono de sí misma que se había abierto camino hasta la superficie con sus imprudentes palabras, y que ahora la impelía rápidamente a cometer acciones aún más imprudentes. «¡Diabólicamente extraño! -pensó el capitán con inquietud-. ¿Le ha trastocado el cerebro la pérdida de su amor?» Reflexionó unos instantes más y luego habló.

- Déjelo para mañana -sugirió el capitán en confianza-. Esta noche está un poco cansada. No hay prisa, mi querida niña, no hay prisa.

Magdalen levantó la cabeza al instante y volvió la mirada hacia él con la misma determinación furiosa, con el mismo y desesperado desprecio de sí misma que el capitán había visto en su rostro en York, el memorable día en York en que Magdalen había actuado ante él por primera vez.

- He venido hasta aquí para contarle lo que tengo pensado -dijo- ¡y se lo contaré! -Se sentó erguida en la pendiente y aferrándose las rodillas con las manos contempló, mirando fijamente al frente, la vista que se sumía poco a poco en la penumbra. En esta extraña postura aguardó hasta haberse serenado, y luego, sin volver la cabeza para mirarlo, dirigió al capitán estas palabras:

- Cuando usted y yo nos conocimos -empezó Magdalen de repente- me esforcé por ocultar mis pensamientos. Ahora sé lo suficiente para darme cuenta de que he fracasado. Cuando le conté en York que Michael Vanstone nos había arruinado, creo que adivinó usted por su cuenta que yo al menos estaba resuelta a no aceptarlo. Tanto si lo adivinó como si no, así es. Abandoné a mis allegados con esa determinación en mente, y la siento ahora en mi interior más fuerte, diez veces más fuerte que antes.

- Diez veces más fuerte que antes -repitió el capitán-. Exactamente, la consecuencia natural de la firmeza de carácter.

- No. La consecuencia natural de no tener nada más en qué pensar. Yo tenía algo más en qué pensar antes de que me encontrara enferma en Vauxhall Walk. Ahora no tengo nada. Recuérdelo, si me encuentra en el futuro repitiendo siempre la misma cantinela. Una pregunta primero. ¿Adivinó usted lo que pensaba hacer aquella mañana en que me mostró el periódico y leí la noticia de la muerte de Michael Vanstone?

- En general -contestó el capitán Wragge-. Adiviné, en general, que se proponía meter la mano en su bolsa y extraer de ella (del modo más correcto) lo que era suyo. En aquel entonces me dolió mucho que no me permitiera ayudarla. ¿Por qué es tan reservada conmigo? (me dije a mí mismo). ¿Por qué es tan irracionalmente reservada?

- Ahora no tendrá reservas de las que quejarse -prosiguió Magdalen-. Se lo digo claramente: si los acontecimientos no se hubieran desarrollado como lo hicieron, usted me habría ayudado. Si Michael Vanstone no hubiera muerto, yo habría ido a Brighton y habría hallado el modo de trabar relación con él sin peligro, usando un nombre falso. Tenía suficiente dinero para vivir respetablemente durante muchos meses. Hubiera empleado ese tiempo, hubiera esperado todo un año, de haber sido necesario, para aniquilar la influencia de la señora Lecount sobre él, y hubiera acabado ganándome esa influencia con mis propias habilidades. Tenía a mi favor la ventaja de la juventud y la novedad, la ventaja de la auténtica desesperación. Habría triunfado. Antes de que

terminara el año, antes de que terminara la mitad del año, habría visto usted cómo despedían a la señora Lecount y me aceptaban en la casa en su lugar como hija adoptiva de Michael Vanstone, como la fiel amiga que le habría salvado de una aventurera en su vejez. Jóvenes no mayores que yo han intentado engaños tan desesperados en apariencia como el mío y los han llevado a cabo con éxito. Tenía preparada mi historia, tenía trazados los planes, sabía cuál era el punto flaco de aquel viejo para atacarlo a mi modo, el mismo que la señora Lecount había hallado antes para atacarlo al suyo; vuelvo a decirle que hubiera tenido éxito.

- Lo creo -dijo el capitán-. ¿Y después qué?

- El señor Michael Vanstone habría cambiado de administrador. Usted le habría sucedido en el puesto y aquellas inteligentes especulaciones en las que invertía con tanta afición le habrían costado la fortuna que nos había robado a mi hermana y a mí. Hasta el último penique, capitán Wragge; tan cierto como que está usted ahí sentado, ¡hasta el último penique! Una audaz conspiración, un escandaloso engaño, ¿no cree? ¡No me importa! La conciencia me dice que cualquier conspiración, cualquier engaño está justificado por la vil ley que nos ha dejado desamparadas. Hablaba usted antes de mi reserva. ¿La he abandonado por fin? ¿No he hablado claro hace un momento?

El capitán se llevó la mano al corazón con solemnidad y se embarcó una vez más en su más caudaloso flujo de palabras.

- Me llena usted de vano pesar -dijo-. De haber vivido aquel viejo, ¡qué cosecha hubiera recogido de él! ¡Qué transacciones de agricultura moral habría tenido el privilegio de efectuar! *Ars longa vita brevis* -dijo el capitán Wragge, pasándose lastimosamente al latín-. Derramemos una lágrima por las oportunidades perdidas del pasado y probemos lo que el presente puede ofrecernos para consolarnos. He sacado una clara conclusión. El experimento que se proponía intentar con el señor Michael Vanstone es totalmente imposible de aplicar, mi querida niña, al caso de su hijo. El hijo es insensible a toda forma común de tentación pecuniaria. Puede usted creer en mi solemne palabra - continuó el capitán, recordando con indignación la respuesta a su anuncio en *The Times*- cuando le informo de que el señor Noel Vanstone es rotundamente el más mezquino de los hombres.

- Puedo creer también en mi propia experiencia -dijo Magdalen-. Lo he visto y he hablado con él; lo conozco mejor que usted. ¡Una nueva revelación, capitán Wragge, para su conocimiento! Le envié ciertas prendas de disfraz cuando ya habían servido al propósito por el que me los llevé a Londres. Ese propósito fue el de llegar hasta Noel Vanstone, disfrazada, y juzgar por mí misma a la señora Lecount y a su amo. Conseguí mi objetivo y le repito que conozco a las dos personas de esa casa de allí, con las que ahora tenemos que tratar, mejor que usted.

El capitán Wragge expresó el profundo asombro y formuló las inocentes preguntas que se adecuaban al estado mental de una persona cogida completamente por sorpresa.

- Bien -prosiguió, cuando Magdalen hubo contestado sucintamente-, ¿y cuál es el resultado de sus propias observaciones? Tiene que haber un resultado, de lo contrario no estaríamos aquí. ¿Ha decidido qué debe hacerse? Sin duda, mi querida niña, lo habrá decidido ya.

- Sí -respondió ella con rapidez-. Lo he decidido.

El capitán se acercó un poco más a ella, con una ávida curiosidad que se manifestaba en cada arruga de su rostro truhanesco.

- Siga -dijo con un susurro impaciente-. Se lo ruego, siga.

Magdalen escudriñó pensativamente la penumbra del anochecer sin darle respuesta, sin que pareciera haberle oído. Sus labios se cerraron y sus manos se apretaron con fuerza inconsciente alrededor de las rodillas.

- No se puede negar el hecho -dijo el capitán Wragge, incitándola con cautela a hablar-,

de que es más difícil abordar al hijo que al padre...

- A mi manera no -le interrumpió Magdalen de repente.

- ¿De veras? -dijo el capitán-. ¡Bien! Dicen que todo tiene su truco, si sabemos buscarlo. Supongo que usted habrá sabido buscarlo y que ha obtenido sus frutos; lo ha encontrado.

- No me he molestado en buscarlo; lo he hallado sin tener que hacerlo.

- ¡Qué demonios! -exclamó el capitán Wragge con gran perplejidad-. Mi querida niña, ¿acaso mi visión de su situación actual me ha inducido a error? Tal como yo lo veo, ahí está el señor Noel Vanstone en posesión de su fortuna y la de su hermana, igual que antes su padre, y tan resuelto a conservarla como él.

- Sí.

- Y aquí está usted, totalmente incapaz de conseguirla mediante la persuasión, totalmente incapaz de obtenerla legalmente, aunque tan resuelta a arrebatársela al hijo como lo estaba en el caso del padre, a su pesar y mediante una estratagema.

- Con la misma resolución. No por la fortuna en sí, ¡fíjese en lo que le digo!, sino por un sentido de justicia.

- Ni más ni menos. ¿Y los medios para hacer justicia, que eran arduos con el padre, que no era un avaro, serán fáciles con el hijo, que sí lo es?

- Verdaderamente fáciles.

- ¡Llámeme asno por primera vez en mi vida! -exclamó el capitán, exasperado-. ¡Que me aspen si sé de lo que habla!

Magdalen le miró por primera vez, le miró fijamente a la cara.

- Se lo diré claramente -dijo-. Voy a casarme con él.

El capitán Wragge empezó a levantarse y se quedó de rodillas, petrificado por el asombro.

- Recuerde lo que le he dicho -continuó Magdalen, volviendo a apartar la vista-. He perdido el amor propio. Ahora sólo me queda un objetivo en la vida, y cuanto antes lo alcance y muera, mejor. Si... -Se interrumpió, cambió de posición y señaló con una mano el arroyo que menguaba rápidamente a sus pies brillando con tenue resplandor a la luz del crepúsculo-. Si fuera lo que era en otro tiempo, antes me hubiera arrojado a ese río que hacer lo que pienso llevar a cabo ahora. Lo cierto es que ya no me preocupa. No quiero fatigar mi mente con más ardides. El camino más corto y vil se abre ante mí. Lo tomo, capitán Wragge, y me caso con él.

- ¿Manteniéndole en la ignorancia sobre su auténtica identidad? -dijo el capitán poniéndose en pie lentamente y volviéndose despacio para verle la cara-. ¿Casándose con él como mi sobrina, la señorita Bygrave?

- Como su sobrina, la señorita Bygrave.

- ¿Y después de la boda...? -Se le quebró la voz al iniciar la pregunta y la dejó sin terminar.

- Después de la boda -dijo Magdalen-, no necesitaré más de su ayuda.

El capitán se inclinó al recibir aquella respuesta, miró de cerca a Magdalen y retrocedió de repente sin pronunciar palabra. Se alejó unos cuantos pasos y se sentó de nuevo con determinación sobre la hierba. Si Magdalen hubiera podido verle el rostro en la penumbra, se habría sobresaltado. Por primera vez desde su niñez, seguramente, el capitán Wragge había mudado de color. Estaba lívido.

- ¿No tiene nada que decir? -preguntó Magdalen-. ¿Espera a oír tal vez qué condiciones le ofrezco? Éstas son mis condiciones. Pagaré todos nuestros gastos aquí y, cuando nos separemos el día de la boda, le haré un regalo de despedida de doscientas libras. ¿Me promete su ayuda con estas condiciones?

- ¿Qué espera de mí? -preguntó él, mirándola furtivamente y con una repentina desconfianza en su tono de voz.

- Espero que proteja mi falsa identidad y la suya -respondió Magdalen-, y que impida que cualquier posible pesquisa por parte de la señora Lecount le revele quién soy en realidad. No pido más. El resto corre de mi cuenta.

- ¿No tendré nada que ver con lo que ocurra en cualquier momento o lugar después de la boda?

- Nada en absoluto.

- ¿Podré abandonarla en la puerta de la iglesia si lo deseo?

- A la puerta de la iglesia y con su gratificación en el bolsillo.

- ¿Pagada con su propio dinero?

- ¡Por supuesto! ¿Cómo habría de pagarla si no?

El capitán Wragge se quitó el sombrero y se pasó el pañuelo por la cara con alivio.

- Déme un minuto para pensarlo -pidió.

- Tantos minutos como quiera -dijo Magdalen volviendo a su antigua postura, apoyada en el terraplén, y a la ocupación anterior de arrancar matas de hierba y lanzarlas al aire.

Las reflexiones del capitán no se vieron enturbiadas por divergencias innecesarias entre la contemplación de su posición y la contemplación de la de Magdalen. Totalmente incapaz de comprender la herida que había infligido a Magdalen la infame traición de Frank -una herida que la había separado, de un solo golpe cruel, de la ambición que, aun siendo engañosa, había sido la ambición salvadora de su vida-, el capitán Wragge aceptó el hecho de su desesperación tal como lo veía y luego pasó directamente a las consecuencias de la propuesta que le había hecho Magdalen.

En la perspectiva «anterior» al matrimonio no veía nada más grave que la práctica de un engaño que no difería demasiado -salvo en el objetivo que se quería alcanzar- de los engaños que su vida de truhán le había acostumbrado desde hacía mucho tiempo a contemplar y a llevar a cabo. En la perspectiva «posterior» al matrimonio distinguía vagamente, a través de la ominosa oscuridad del futuro, los fantasmas acechantes del crimen y el terror, y tras ellos los negros abismos de la ruina y la muerte. Hombre con una audacia y recursos ilimitados dentro de sus propios y mezquinos límites, más allá de estos límites el capitán era tan respetuosamente sumiso a la majestad de la ley como el hombre más inofensivo, y tan cauto en salvaguardar su seguridad personal como el mayor cobarde que haya pisado la tierra. Pero una grave duda ocupaba sus pensamientos. ¿Podría, en las condiciones que le proponía Magdalen, formar parte de la conspiración contra Noel Vanstone hasta el momento de la boda y retirarse luego sin peligro de verse envuelto en las consecuencias que la experiencia le decía que habrían de producirse con toda certeza?

Por extraño que parezca, su decisión en aquel momento de necesidad estuvo influida nada menos que por el propio Noel Vanstone. El capitán podría haberse resistido a la oferta monetaria que le hacía Magdalen, pues los beneficios del espectáculo teatral habían llenado sus bolsillos con una cantidad más de tres veces superior a las doscientas libras. Pero la perspectiva de asestar un golpe en la oscuridad al hombre que

les había puesto un precio de cinco libras a él y a su información resultó más fuerte que su prudencia y su dominio de sí mismo. En el pequeño terreno neutral de la vanidad, los mejores y los peores hombres se encuentran en las mismas condiciones. La indignación del capitán Wragge cuando leyó la respuesta a su anuncio no disminuyó ante una apreciación retrospectiva de su propia conducta; se sintió tan ofendido y furioso como si hubiera realizado una propuesta absolutamente honorable y la hubieran recompensado con un insulto personal. El agravio que sentía era demasiado grande para que no se reflejara en su primera carta a Magdalen. Se había propasado en mayor o menor medida en todas las ocasiones posteriores en que se había mencionado el nombre de Noel Vanstone y, al decidir finalmente el rumbo que debía seguir, no es excesivo decir que, por primera vez en su vida, el incentivo del dinero retrocedió a un segundo lugar y el del rencor salió triunfante.

- Acepto -dijo el capitán Wragge, poniéndose de nuevo en pie rápidamente-. Supeditándolo, claro está, a las condiciones acordadas. Nos separaremos el día de la boda. Yo no preguntaré qué hará usted, usted no me preguntará qué haré yo. A partir de entonces será como si no nos conociéramos.

Magdalen se levantó lentamente de la cuesta. Sus maneras y su aspecto traslucían un decaimiento lúgubre y desesperado. Rechazó la mano que le ofrecía el capitán, y su tono, cuando le respondió, fue tan bajo que él apenas pudo oírla.

- Nos hemos entendido perfectamente -dijo-, y ya podemos volver. Mañana puede presentarme a la señora Lecount.

- Primero debo hacerle unas preguntas -manifestó el capitán con severidad-. En este asunto se corren más riesgos y hay más escollos en nuestro camino de los que usted parece suponer. Debo conocer toda la historia de su visita a la señora Lecount antes de hacer que usted y esa mujer se conozcan.

- Espere a mañana -espetó Magdalen con impaciencia-. No me atosigue hablando de ello esta noche.

El capitán no dijo nada más. Volvieron la mirada hacia Aldborough y regresaron caminando lentamente.

Cuando llegaron a las casas, la noche había caído sobre ellos. No eran visibles ni la luna ni las estrellas. Una débil brisa silenciosa que soplaba desde tierra había llegado acompañando a la oscuridad. Magdalen se detuvo en el solitario paseo para respirar el aire con mayor comodidad. Al cabo de un rato, dio la espalda a la brisa y miró hacia el mar. El inconmensurable silencio de las aguas serenas, perdidas en el negro vacío de la noche, resultaba espantoso. Magdalen contempló la oscuridad como si no tuviera secretos para ella; avanzó lentamente como impelida por alguna atracción oculta en la negrura.

- Voy a bajar al mar -dijo a su compañero-. Espere aquí, en seguida vuelvo.

El capitán la perdió de vista en un instante; fue como si se la hubiera tragado la noche. El capitán escuchó y contó los pasos de Magdalen por el ruido que hacían sobre los guijarros en el profundo silencio. Se alejaban lentamente, adentrándose en la negrura cada vez más. De repente, cesó el ruido. ¿Se había detenido en su camino o había llegado a una de las franjas de arena que el reflujo dejaba al descubierto?

Aguardó y aguzó los oídos con inquietud. El tiempo pasaba y no conseguía oír nada. Siguió escuchando con creciente recelo hacia la oscuridad. Segundos después le llegó un sonido desde la playa invisible. Distante y débil, un largo gemido quebró el silencio. Luego, todo volvió a quedar en calma.

Súbitamente alarmado, el capitán se dispuso a bajar hasta la playa y llamar a Magdalen. Antes de que pudiera cruzar el paseo, oyó unos pasos que avanzaban con rapidez. Esperó un momento y la figura de un hombre pasó rápidamente a lo largo del paseo, entre él y el mar. Estaba demasiado oscuro para distinguir los rasgos del desconocido; sólo pudo ver que era un hombre alto, tan alto como aquel oficial de la marina mercante

llamado Kirke.

La figura pasó dirigiéndose al norte y desapareció inmediatamente. El capitán Wragge cruzó el paseo, bajó unos cuantos pasos hacia la playa, se detuvo y volvió a escuchar. El ruido de pasos sobre la grava llegó una vez más a sus oídos, tan despacio como antes se había alejado. El capitán llamó para guiarlos hasta él. Magdalen apareció a la vista ascendiendo la cuesta de grava como una sombra que surgía de la negrura de la noche.

- Me ha alarmado -susurró el capitán con nerviosismo-. Temía que le hubiera ocurrido algo. La he oído gritar, como si sufriera algún dolor.

- ¿En serio? -dijo Magdalen con indiferencia-. Sufría un dolor. No importa. Ahora todo ha terminado.

Mientras contestaba, la mano de Magdalen se balanceaba algo mecánicamente. Era la bolsita de seda blanca que había ocultado en su seno hasta entonces. Una de las reliquias que contenía -una de las reliquias de las que no se había desprendido antes por flaquearle el ánimo- había desaparecido para siempre. Sola en una playa extraña, Magdalen se había separado del más querido de sus recuerdos y esperanzas virginales. Sola en una playa extraña, había sacado el mechón de cabellos de Frank del lugar en el que antes lo atesoraba y lo había arrojado lejos de sí, al mar y a la noche.

CAPÍTULO II

El hombre alto que había pasado por delante del capitán Wragge en la oscuridad siguió caminando con rapidez por el paseo, acortó camino a través de una pequeña extensión de tierra baldía y entró por la puerta abierta del Aldborough Hotel. La luz del pasillo que al pasar le dio de lleno en el rostro demostró la veracidad de la suposición del capitán Wragge: el desconocido era el señor Kirke, de la marina mercante.

Al encontrarse con el dueño en el pasillo, el señor Kirke le saludó inclinando la cabeza con la familiaridad de un antiguo cliente.

- ¿Tiene usted el periódico? -preguntó-. Quiero echar un vistazo a la lista de visitantes.

- Lo tengo en mi habitación, señor -dijo el dueño, encabezando la marcha hacia un gabinete del fondo-. ¿Cree usted que encontrará a algún amigo suyo aquí?

El marino buscó la lista sin responder en cuanto colocaron el periódico en sus manos y la recorrió con el dedo, nombre por nombre. El dedo se detuvo de repente en esta línea: «Sea-View Cottage: señor Noel Vanstone». Kirke, del servicio mercante, repitió el nombre para sus adentros y dejó el periódico con aire pensativo.

- ¿Ha encontrado a algún conocido, capitán? -preguntó el dueño.

- He encontrado un nombre que conozco, un nombre del que mi padre hablaba a menudo en sus tiempos. ¿Tiene familia este tal señor Vanstone? ¿Sabe si hay una joven en la casa?

- No sabría decírselo, capitán. Mi mujer llegará en seguida. Seguro que ella lo sabe. Debe de hacer bastante tiempo, si su padre conocía a ese señor Vanstone, ¿no?

- Sí, fue hace mucho tiempo. Mi padre conoció a un oficial subalterno con ese nombre cuando se hallaba en Canadá con su regimiento. Sería curioso que el de aquí resultara ser el mismo hombre y que esa joven fuera su hija.

- Discúlpeme, capitán, pero parece usted algo pendiente de esa joven -dijo el dueño con una agradable sonrisa.

Al señor Kirke no pareció agradarle demasiado el derrotero que acababa de tomar el buen humor del dueño. Volvió bruscamente al tema del oficial subalterno y el regimiento en Canadá.

- La historia de aquel pobre hombre era la más triste que he oído en mi vida -dijo, mirando de nuevo distraídamente la lista de visitantes.

- ¿Se causaría algún daño si me la contara, señor? -preguntó el dueño-. Triste o no, una historia es una historia, cuando se sabe que es verídica.

El señor Kirke vaciló.

- No creo que hiciera bien en contarla -dijo-. Si ese hombre o cualquier pariente suyo vivieran todavía, no les gustaría que unos desconocidos conocieran una historia como la suya. Lo único que puedo decirle es que mi padre salvó a ese joven oficial en terribles circunstancias. Se despidieron en Canadá. Mi padre se quedó con su regimiento; el joven oficial abandonó el ejército y volvió a Inglaterra. No volvieron a verse. Sería curioso que este Vanstone fuera el mismo hombre. Sería curioso...

Se interrumpió de repente cuando otra referencia a «la joven» estaba a punto de escapar de sus labios. En ese mismo momento entró la esposa del dueño y el señor Kirke trasladó inmediatamente sus preguntas a la autoridad más alta de la casa.

- ¿Sabe usted algo de este señor Vanstone que aparece en la lista de visitantes? -

preguntó el marino-, ¿Es un hombre mayor?

- Es un hombrecillo de aspecto miserable -respondió la mujer-, ¡pero no es viejo, capitán!

- Entonces no es el hombre al que me refería. Quizá sea el hijo. ¿Vive alguna señora con él?

La patrona levantó el mentón e hizo una mueca de desprecio.

- Tiene un ama de llaves -dijo-. Una mujer de mediana edad, no es de mi clase. Tal vez me equivoque, pero no me gusta ver a una mujer tan bien vestida en su posición.

- Debo de haber cometido un error con la casa -dijo el señor Kirke, que empezaba a desconcertarse-. ¿Sea-View Cottage no es ésa que tiene el césped cortado en forma octogonal y un asta de bandera blanca en el centro del paseo de gravilla?

- ¡Ésa no es Sea-View, señor! Es North Shingles de la que habla, donde reside el señor Bygrave. Su esposa y su sobrina han llegado hoy en la diligencia. Su esposa es lo bastante alta para exhibirla en la feria, y la mujer peor vestida que he visto jamás. Pero la señorita Bygrave es una joven digna de verse, si se me permite decirlo. En mi opinión es la chica más guapa que hemos tenido en Aldborough desde hace mucho tiempo. ¡Me pregunto quiénes serán! ¿Le suena el nombre, capitán?

- No -respondió el señor Kirke con una sombra de decepción en su rostro moreno y curtido-. No había oído nunca ese nombre.

Tras estas palabras, se levantó para marcharse. En vano le invitó el dueño a beber un último vaso; en vano insistió la patrona para que se quedara diez minutos más y tomara una taza de té. Él se limitó a aducir que su hermana lo estaba esperando y que debía regresar a la casa parroquial inmediatamente.

El señor Kirke abandonó el hotel en dirección oeste y caminó hacia el interior a lo largo de la carretera con toda la celeridad que le permitía la oscuridad.

«¿Bygrave? -pensó-. ¡Ahora que conozco su nombre, de qué me va a servir! Si hubiera sido Vanstone, tal vez el hijo de mi padre hubiera gozado de alguna ocasión de trabar relación con ella.» Se detuvo y volvió la vista hacia Aldborough.

- ¡Qué estúpido soy! -exclamó de repente, golpeando el suelo con el bastón-. Cumplí los cuarenta en mi último cumpleaños. -Se dio la vuelta y continuó más deprisa que antes con la cabeza gacha; sus resueltos ojos negros escudriñaban la oscuridad del terreno de la misma forma que otras muchas veces el mar desde la cubierta de su barco.

Después de caminar más de una hora, Kirke llegó a una aldea con una pequeña y primitiva iglesia y una casa parroquial, situadas la una junto a la otra en el fondo de una hondonada. Entró en la casa por la parte de atrás y halló a su hermana, la esposa del clérigo, sentada sola con su labor en la salita.

- ¿Dónde está tu marido, Lizzie? -preguntó, sentándose en una silla en un rincón.

- William ha ido a ver a un enfermo. Tuvo el tiempo justo antes de salir -añadió con una sonrisa- para hablarme de la joven y afirma que no volverá a Aldborough contigo hasta que sientes la cabeza y te cases. -Se interrumpió y miró a su hermano con mayor atención de la que le había dedicado hasta entonces-. ¡Robert! -exclamó, dejando a un lado su labor y acercándose a él repentinamente-. Pareces inquieto y angustiado. William bromeaba sobre tu encuentro con la joven, pero... ¿Es serio? Dime, ¿cómo es?

Él volvió la cabeza.

La hermana se sentó en un taburete a sus pies e insistió en mirarlo.

- ¿Es serio? -repitió en voz baja.

El rostro curtido de Kirke no estaba acostumbrado a disimulos; respondió por él antes de que pronunciara una sola palabra.

- No se lo digas a tu marido hasta que me haya ido -pidió con una rudeza que nunca antes había conocido su hermana-. Sé que merezco que se burlen de mí, pero aun así me duele.

- ¿Te duele? -repitió ella, atónita.

- No puedes considerarme ni la mitad de idiota de lo que me considero yo, Lizzie -prosiguió Kirke con amargura-. Un hombre de mi edad no debería hacer estas cosas. No la he visto más de un minuto y ahí me ves, rondando el lugar hasta después del anochecer con la esperanza de volver a verla; agazapado, habría dicho yo si hubiera encontrado a uno de mis hombres haciendo lo que hacía yo. Creo que estoy embrujado. No es más que una muchacha, Lizzie, dudo de que haya cumplido los veinte, tengo edad para ser su padre. Da igual; la tengo metida en la cabeza a mi pesar. He visto su rostro mirándome en la más completa oscuridad en cada paso que he dado hasta llegar a esta casa; me está mirando ahora tan claramente como te veo a ti; más aún.

Kirke se levantó con gesto impaciente y empezó a caminar de un lado a otro de la estancia. Su hermana lo miró con la sorpresa y también con la simpatía pintadas en el rostro. Estaba acostumbrada a ver a su hermano siempre dueño de sí mismo desde que era adolescente. En los años posteriores, con la ruina de la familia, él había sido su ejemplo y su sostén. Ella sabía que en situaciones críticas y desesperadas de la vida en alta mar, cuando cientos de compañeros habían buscado en la sangre fría de su hermano la salvación ante la amenaza de la muerte, no habían buscado en vano. Jamás en toda su vida había visto que la mente serena y equitativa de su hermano perdiera el equilibrio como lo veía ahora.

- ¿Cómo puedes hablar de esa manera tan poco razonable sobre tu edad y sobre ti mismo? -dijo-. No hay mujer que sea lo bastante buena para ti, Robert. ¿Cómo se llama?

- Bygrave. ¿Te suena?

- No, pero podría trabar relación con ella. Si tuviéramos un poco más de tiempo, si pudiera ir a Aldborough y verla, pero te vas mañana; tu barco zarpa al final de la semana.

- ¡Gracias a Dios! -dijo Kirke con vehemencia.

- ¿Te alegras de marcharte? -preguntó ella, cada vez más asombrada.

- Y mucho, Lizzie, por mi propio bien. Si quiero recobrar el buen juicio, habré de hallarlo en la cubierta de mi barco. Esa chica se ha interpuesto ya entre mis pensamientos y yo; no permitiré que se interponga también entre mi deber y yo. Eso lo tengo muy claro. Por idiota que sea, tengo el sentido común suficiente para no dejarme tentar por la cercanía de Aldborough mañana por la mañana. Estoy en condiciones de caminar otros treinta kilómetros; emprenderé el regreso esta noche.

Su hermana se levantó y lo cogió con fuerza del brazo.

- ¡Robert! -exclamó-. No hablarás en serio. No pensarás marcharte a pie y solo en medio de la noche.

- Sólo significa que despedirnos será lo último que hagamos esta noche, querida, en lugar de ser lo primero que hagamos por la mañana -replicó él con una sonrisa-. Intenta ser indulgente conmigo, Lizzie. Me he pasado la vida en el mar y no estoy acostumbrado a tener el ánimo tan alterado. En tierra los hombres están acostumbrados, se lo toman con calma. Yo no puedo. Si me quedara aquí, no descansaría. Si esperara hasta mañana, volvería allí a echarle otra mirada. No quiero sentirme más avergonzado de mí mismo de lo que ya estoy. Quiero concentrarme de nuevo en mi deber y en mí mismo sin pararme a pensarlo dos veces. La oscuridad no significa nada para mí; estoy acostumbrado a la oscuridad. Caminaré por la carretera para no perderme. ¡Déjame

marchar, Lizzie! El único amor con el que puedo tener tratos a mi edad es mi barco. ¡Déjame volver a él!

Su hermana siguió sujetándole con fuerza por el brazo y rogándole que se quedara hasta la mañana siguiente. Él la escuchó con absoluta paciencia y amabilidad, pero Lizzie no consiguió hacerle cambiar de opinión.

- ¿Qué le diré a William? -imploró-. ¿Qué pensará cuando vuelva y vea que te has marchado?

- Dile que he seguido el consejo que nos dio en el sermón del domingo pasado. Dile que he dado la espalda al mundo, al demonio y a la carne.

- ¡Cómo puedes hablar así, Robert! Y además están los niños; prometiste no marcharte sin despedirte de los niños.

- Eso es cierto. Hice una promesa a mis sobrinos y la cumpliré. -Se quitó los zapatos, empujándolos con los pies mientras hablaba, sobre la estera que había al otro lado de la puerta-. Acompáñame con la luz hasta arriba, Lizzie; me despediré de los dos sin despertarlos.

Ella comprendió la inutilidad de seguir oponiéndose y, cogiendo la bujía, precedió a su hermano escaleras arriba.

Los niños -ambos de corta edad- dormían juntos en la misma cama. El menor de ellos era el favorito de su tío, de quien era tocayo. El niño dormía beatíficamente abrazado con fuerza a un tosco juguete de madera. Los ojos de Kirke se suavizaron cuando se acercó de puntillas por su lado de la cama y lo besó con femenina dulzura.

- ¡Pobre hombrecito! -dijo el marino afectuosamente-. Le tiene tanto cariño a su barco de madera como yo a su edad. Le tallaré uno mejor cuando vuelva. ¿Me entregarás a mi sobrino uno de estos días, Lizzie, y me dejarás hacer un marino de él?

- ¡Oh, Robert, ojalá te casaras y fueras tan feliz como yo!

- Se me ha pasado la época, querida. Habré de sacar el mayor partido posible de lo que tengo con la ayuda de mi sobrino.

Salió de la habitación. Las lágrimas rodaban por las mejillas de su hermana cuando le siguió hasta la salita.

- Hay algo desesperado y terrible en esta forma de dejarnos -dijo-. ¿Quieres que vaya a Aldborough mañana e intente trabar relación con ella por ti, Robert?

- ¡No! -respondió él-. Déjala en paz. Si el destino quiere que vuelva a ver otra vez a esa chica, la veré. Deja actuar al destino y obrarás correctamente. -Se puso los zapatos y cogió su bastón y su sombrero-. No voy a caminar más de lo que pueda -dijo alegremente-. Si no me alcanza la diligencia en la carretera, la esperaré donde me pare a desayunar. Sécate esas lágrimas, querida, y dame un beso.

Lizzie tenía las facciones y la tez como su hermano, y también un toque de su carácter; se enjugó las lágrimas y se despidió de él con valentía.

- Volveré dentro de un año -dijo Kirke en la puerta, volviendo a adoptar sus viejas maneras de marino-. Te traeré un chal de la China, Lizzie, y una caja de té para tu despensa. No dejes que los chicos me olviden y no pienses que hago mal marchándome así. Sé que hago bien. ¡Que Dios te bendiga y te guarde, querida, y a tu marido y a tus hijos! ¡Adiós!

Se inclinó y besó a su hermana. Ella corrió hacia la puerta para verlo marchar. Una ráfaga de aire apagó la vela y la negra noche lo engulló en un instante.

Tres días después el buque mercante de primera clase, Deliverance -capitán: Kirke-, zarpó de Londres con destino al mar de la China.

CAPÍTULO III

La amenaza de cambio y de tormenta se disipó con la noche. Cuando amaneció sobre Aldborough, el sol brillaba en el cielo azul y el agua del mar se rizaba alegremente bajo la brisa estival.

A una hora en que ningún otro visitante de la estación balnearia se había levantado aún, el infatigable Wragge apareció en la puerta de Villa North Shingles y dirigió sus pasos hacia el norte con un ejemplar bellamente encuadernado de los *Scientific Dialogues* de Joyce en la mano. Al llegar al terreno yermo que se extendía detrás de las casas, bajó hasta la playa y abrió el libro. La entrevista de la noche anterior había agudizado su percepción de las dificultades que hallaría en su próxima empresa. Estaba ahora doblemente determinado a probar el experimento de caracterización que había apuntado en su carta a Magdalen y a concentrar en sí mismo -caracterizado como un hombre de vastos conocimientos- todo el interés y la atención de la formidable señora Lecount.

Tras haber tomado su dosis de ciencia de manual (por usar su misma expresión) con el estómago vacío, el capitán Wragge se reunió con su pequeño círculo familiar para el desayuno, ahíto de información para el resto del día. Observó que el rostro de Magdalen mostraba signos evidentes de una noche de vigilia. Magdalen no se quejó; se comportó con tranquilidad y perfecto dominio de sí misma. La señora Wragge -recuperada tras trece horas de reposo ininterrumpido- se hallaba de un humor excelente y (milagro) llevaba los dos zapatos bien calzados. Llevó consigo a la habitación varias hojas grandes de papel de seda limpiamente recortadas de muchas y misteriosas formas, que inmediatamente originaron la pregunta corta y seca de su marido:

- ¿Qué lleva ahí?

- Patrones, capitán -dijo la señora Wragge con tímido tono conciliatorio-. Fui de compras en Londres y compré un traje de cachemira oriental. Costó mucho dinero y voy a intentar ahorrar haciéndolo yo misma. Tengo mis patrones y mis instrucciones de costura tan claras como escritas en letra de imprenta. Seré muy ordenada, capitán. Me quedaré en mi rincón, si por favor me da uno, y tanto si me zumba la cabeza como si no, me sentaré derecha mientras me ocupo en mi labor.

- Hará su labor -dijo el capitán severamente- cuando sepa quién es, quién soy yo y quién es esta señorita, no antes. ¡Muéstreme los pies! Bien. ¡Muéstreme la cofia! Bien. Sirva el desayuno.

Cuando el desayuno terminó, la señora Wragge recibió órdenes de retirarse a una habitación contigua y esperar allí hasta que su marido fuera a liberarla. Tan pronto como la señora Wragge se dio la vuelta, el capitán Wragge reanudó la conversación suspendida la noche anterior por deseo expreso de Magdalen. Todas las preguntas que le formuló estaban relacionadas con el tema de la visita que Magdalen realizó disfrazada a la casa de Noel Vanstone. Eran las preguntas de un hombre muy lúcido: cortas, pertinentes y minuciosas. En menos de media hora conocía cada uno de los incidentes acaecidos en Vauxhall Walk.

Las conclusiones que extrajo el capitán tras obtener la información fueron claras y fácilmente expresadas.

En cuanto a los aspectos desfavorables, manifestó su convicción de que sin duda la señora Lecount había advertido que su visitante iba disfrazada, de que no había abandonado en realidad la habitación, aunque hubiera abierto y cerrado la puerta, y de que por tanto en las dos ocasiones en que Magdalen se había delatado a sí misma utilizando su propia voz, la señora Lecount la había oído. En cuanto a los aspectos favorables, el capitán tenía la absoluta certeza de que el rostro y las cejas pintadas, la peluca y la capa con relleno habían ocultado la identidad de Magdalen tan eficazmente que podía desafiar el escrutinio más atento de la señora Lecount presentándose ante

ella con su auténtico aspecto. La dificultad de engañar a los oídos de la señora Lecount igual que a sus ojos no sería tan fácil de solucionar, admitió el capitán sin rodeos. Pero teniendo en cuenta el hecho de que en las dos ocasiones Magdalen se había dejado llevar por la ira, el capitán opinaba que la voz de Magdalen tenía todas las posibilidades razonables de no ser descubierta si evitaba cuidadosamente sus estallidos de genio en el futuro y hablaba en ese tono más tranquilo y normal que la señora Lecount aún no había oído. En general, el capitán se inclinaba a declararse esperanzado si se eliminaba un serio obstáculo desde el principio: ese obstáculo era ni más ni menos que la presencia de la señora Wragge en el lugar de la acción.

Para sorpresa de Magdalen, cuando el curso de su narración le llevó a la historia del fantasma, el capitán Wragge la escuchó con el aire de un hombre que se sentía más fastidiado que divertido por lo que oía. Cuando Magdalen terminó, el capitán le dijo claramente que su desafortunado encuentro con la señora Wragge en las escaleras de la casa de huéspedes era, en su opinión, el más grave de todos los accidentes ocurridos en Vauxhall Walk.

- Puedo resolver la dificultad de la estupidez de mi mujer -dijo-, como he hecho a menudo. Puedo meterle su nueva identidad en la cabeza, pero no puedo sacarle el fantasma de ella. No tenemos la seguridad de que no recordará a la mujer de la capa gris y el sombrero papalina en el momento más crítico y en las circunstancias menos oportunas. En inglés corriente, mi querida niña, la señora Wragge es una trampa bajo nuestros pies a cada paso que damos.

- Si conocemos la existencia de la trampa -dijo Magdalen-, podemos tomar medidas para evitarla. ¿Qué propone usted?

- Propongo -contestó el capitán- el traslado temporal de la señora Wragge. Hablando meramente desde un punto de vista pecuniario, no puedo permitirme el lujo de separarme de ella definitivamente. Habrá leído a menudo el caso de personas muy pobres súbitamente enriquecidas por herencias que les llegan de lugares remotos e inesperados. El caso de la señora Wragge, cuando me casé con ella, era uno de ésos. Una pariente ya mayor compartió los favores de la fortuna con mi mujer en una de esas ocasiones y, si mantengo las apariencias de una vida familiar, es porque sé por casualidad que la señora Wragge resultará ser beneficiosa para mí una segunda vez a la muerte de esa pariente mayor. De no ser por esta circunstancia, seguramente habría transferido a mi mujer al cuidado de la sociedad en su conjunto, con la alegre convicción de que, si no la mantenía yo, lo haría alguna otra persona. Aunque no puedo permitirme el lujo de actuar de esa manera, no veo objeción alguna a alojarla por el momento y confortablemente en algún otro lugar, digamos en alguna granja apartada y caracterizada como una señora a la que aqueja una enfermedad mental. Para usted el gasto sería insignificante, para mí el alivio sería indescriptible. ¿Qué me dice? ¿La preparo de inmediato y me la llevo en la próxima diligencia?

- ¡No! -respondió Magdalen con firmeza-. La vida de la pobrecilla ya es bastante dura. No contribuiré a empeorarla. Se mostró afectuosa y realmente amable conmigo cuando estuve enferma y no permitiré que esté encerrada entre gente extraña si puedo evitarlo. El riesgo de tenerla aquí sólo es un riesgo más. Yo lo correré, capitán Wragge, si usted no quiere hacerlo.

- Piénselo bien -dijo el capitán con gravedad- antes de decidirse a conservar a su lado a la señora Wragge.

- Ya lo he pensado -replicó Magdalen-. No permitiré que la separe de nosotros.

- Muy bien -dijo el capitán con resignación-. Nunca me entrometo en cuestiones de sentimientos. Pero tengo algo que decir en mi favor. Si quiere que mis servicios sean de alguna utilidad para usted, no puedo tener las manos atadas desde el comienzo. Esto se lo digo en serio. No permitiré que mi mujer y la señora Lecount se conozcan. A mí me da miedo, aunque a usted no se lo dé, y pongo como condición que si la señora Wragge se queda aquí, permanezca en su habitación. Si usted cree que su salud lo requiere, puede sacarla a dar un paseo por la mañana temprano o por la noche, pero no debe

dejarla salir jamás ni con la criada ni sola. Lo digo con toda claridad, es demasiado importante para tomárselo a la ligera. ¿Qué me dice, sí o no?

- Digo que sí -respondió Magdalen tras unos instantes de reflexión-. A condición de que pueda sacarla a pasear como usted propone.

El capitán Wragge inclinó la cabeza y recobró la suavidad de sus maneras.

- ¿Cuáles son nuestros planes? -preguntó-. ¿Iniciaremos nuestra empresa esta tarde? ¿Está usted lista para ser presentada a la señora Lecount y a su amo?

- Totalmente.

- Bien de nuevo. Los encontraremos en el paseo a la hora habitual en que salen, a las dos. Aún no son las doce. Dispongo de dos horas, el tiempo justo para meter a mi mujer en su nuevo pellejo. El proceso es absolutamente necesario para evitar que nos comprometa delante de la criada. No tema por los resultados; he metido a la señora Wragge una copiosa selección de nombres falsos en la cabeza en el curso de nuestra carrera conyugal. No es más que una cuestión de metérselo con fuerza, nada más. Creo que ahora ya está todo arreglado. ¿Hay algo que pueda hacer antes de las dos? ¿Tiene usted alguna ocupación en que emplear la mañana?

- No -dijo Magdalen-. Volveré a mi habitación e intentaré descansar.

- Ha pasado una mala noche, me temo... -dijo el capitán, abriéndole cortésmente la puerta.

- Me he quedado dormida una o dos veces -contestó ella con indiferencia-. Supongo que estoy un poco nerviosa. Los audaces ojos negros de aquel hombre que me miró tan groseramente ayer por la tarde parecían volver a mirarme en mis sueños. Si lo vemos hoy y vuelve a molestarme, tendré que pedirle a usted que hable con él. Nos encontraremos aquí a las dos. No sea duro con la señora Wragge; enséñele lo que ha de aprender con la mayor delicadeza posible.

Magdalen se despidió de él con estas palabras y se fue arriba.

Se tumbó en la cama con un hondo suspiro e intentó dormir. Fue inútil. El triste hastío de sí misma que se había adueñado de ella no era el tipo de cansancio que encuentra su remedio en el reposo. Volvió a levantarse, se sentó junto a la ventana y contempló el mar con apatía.

Una naturaleza más débil que la suya no habría sufrido bajo el golpe de la deserción de Frank como lo había sufrido ella, como lo sufría aún. Una naturaleza más débil habría buscado refugio en la indignación y consuelo en las lágrimas. La fuerza apasionada del amor de Magdalen se aferraba desesperadamente al naufragio de su propio engaño, se aferró a él hasta que consiguió desprenderse por simple fuerza de voluntad. Lo único que podían hacer su orgullo innato y su agudo sentido de la injusticia era llenarla de vergüenza por insistir en pensamientos que aún se alimentaban de la imperecedera devoción del pasado, que seguían atribuyendo perversamente la cruel despedida de Frank a cualquier otra causa menos a la vileza natural del hombre que la había escrito. No ha nacido aún la mujer que pueda arrancarse del corazón un amor verdadero porque el objeto de ese amor sea indigno de ella. Lo único que puede hacer es luchar contra él en secreto, hundirse en la contienda, si es débil, o llegar a superarlo, si es fuerte, mediante un proceso de mortificación que es, de todos los remedios morales aplicados a la naturaleza de una mujer, el más peligroso y el más desesperado, y de todos los cambios morales, el que sin duda la marcará de por vida. La fortaleza de Magdalen la había sostenido durante la lucha, y el resultado la había dejado tal como era ahora.

Tras permanecer sentada junto a la ventana durante casi una hora -sus ojos mirando la vista sin verla, su mente vacía de impresiones y de pensamientos-, se sacudió el extraño estupor que la poseía estando despierta, se levantó y se dispuso a prepararse para el asunto más importante del día.

Se dirigió al armario y descolgó de las perchas dos delicados vestidos de muselina de vivos colores que se habían confeccionado para el verano anterior en Combe-Raven y que, por su escaso valor, no valió la pena vender cuando Magdalen se deshizo del resto de su vestuario. Después de colocar esos vestidos uno junto al otro sobre la cama, volvió a repasar el contenido del armario. Sólo contenía otro vestido de verano, el de sencilla alpaca que había llevado durante su memorable entrevista con Noel Vanstone y la señora Lecount. Éste lo dejó donde estaba, decidiendo no llevarlo, no tanto por miedo a que el ama de llaves pudiera reconocer un estampado que era demasiado discreto para llamar la atención y demasiado común para ser recordado, como por la convicción de que no era lo bastante alegre ni le favorecía lo suficiente para su propósito. Después de coger un sencillo pañuelo de muselina blanca, unos guantes de cabritilla de color gris perla y una pamela toscana de los cajones del armario, lo cerró y se metió la llave cuidadosamente en el bolsillo.

En lugar de proceder a vestirse sin dilación, se sentó a contemplar ociosamente los dos vestidos de muselina; le era indiferente llevar uno u otro, pero aun siendo ilógico, dudaba cuál ponerse.

«¡Qué importa! -se dijo con una imprudente carcajada-. A mis propios ojos seré igualmente indigna, me ponga el que me ponga.» Se estremeció como si el sonido de su propia risa la hubiera sobresaltado y bruscamente cogió el vestido que tenía más a mano. Era azul y blanco, del tono azul que más convenía a su blanco cutis. Se lo puso apresuradamente sin acercarse siquiera al espejo. Por primera vez en su vida, le horrorizó enfrentarse con su propia imagen, excepto un momento, cuando se arregló el pelo bajo la pamela, pero se alejó del espejo inmediatamente. Se echó el pañuelo sobre los hombros y se puso los guantes de espaldas al tocador. «¿Me pinto? -se preguntó, notando instintivamente que estaba palideciendo-. Aún tengo el rouge. No puede hacer mi cara más falsa de lo que ya es.» Miró hacia atrás para verse en el espejo y de nuevo apartó la vista. «¡No! -dijo-. Tengo que enfrentarme con la señora Lecount, además de su amo. Nada de pintura.» Tras consultar el reloj, salió de la habitación y bajó de nuevo. Sólo faltaban diez minutos para las dos.

El capitán Wragge la aguardaba en la salita, respetable con su levita, un rígido corbatín de verano y sombrero blanco de copa, impecable y alegremente rural con su chaleco amarillo, pantalones grises y polainas a juego. Los cuellos eran más altos que nunca y llevaba un taburete de tijera en la mano. Cualquier comerciante de Inglaterra que lo hubiera visto en aquel momento habría confiado en él inmediatamente.

- ¡Encantadora! -dijo el capitán, examinando a Magdalen paternalmente cuando entró en la habitación-. ¡Tan fresca y juvenil! Un poco pálida, querida, y demasiado seria. Por lo demás, perfecta. Pruebe a sonreír.

- Cuando sea el momento de sonreír -dijo Magdalen con aspereza-, confíe en mi práctica teatral para cualquier cambio de expresión que sea necesario. ¿Dónde está la señora Wragge?

- La señora Wragge ha aprendido su lección -respondió el capitán-, y como recompensa tiene mi permiso para sentarse a trabajar en su habitación. Apruebo ese nuevo capricho por la costura porque sin duda absorberá toda su atención y la mantendrá encerrada en casa. No tenemos por qué temer que acabe su traje oriental demasiado pronto, pues no hay error en el proceso de confección que no vaya a cometer con toda seguridad. Se sentará a incubar su traje, perdone la expresión, como una gallina que incubara un huevo podrido. Le aseguro que su nueva manía me alivia. No podía ser más oportuna en las actuales circunstancias.

Caminó pavoneándose hasta la ventana, miró por ella e hizo señas a Magdalen de que se acercara.

- ¡Ahí están! -dijo, y señaló al paseo.

Cuando Magdalen miró, Noel Vanstone pasaba caminando lentamente, vestido con un temo de anticuado mahón. Aparentemente era uno de esos días en que su salud se

hallaba en el peor momento. Se apoyaba en el brazo de la señora Lecount y ella lo protegía del sol con una sombrilla ligera. El ama de llaves -perfectamente ataviada, como siempre, con un sencillo vestido veraniego de color azul lavanda, mantilla negra, un modesto sombrero de paja y un velo azul claro- acompañaba a su amo enfermo atendiéndole con el más solícito afecto, dirigiendo en ocasiones respetuosamente su atención hacia los diversos objetos de la panorámica marina, e inclinando a veces la cabeza para agradecer graciosamente la cortesía de los transeúntes del paseo, que se hacían a un lado para dejar pasar al enfermo. La señora Lecount produjo un efecto visible entre los hombres ociosos de la playa. La siguieron con mirada e interés unánime, e intercambiaron inclinaciones de cabeza, a modo de aprobación, que expresaban sus pensamientos con tanta claridad como lo hubieran hecho las palabras: «¡Una mujer muy hogareña! ¡Una mujer realmente superior!».

Los ojos bicolores del capitán Wragge siguieron a la señora Lecount con atención recelosa.

- Nos espera un duro trabajo -susurró al oído de Magdalen-, más duro de lo que cree, para echar a esa mujer de su sitio.

- Espere -dijo Magdalen tranquilamente-. Espere y verá.

Magdalen se encaminó hacia la puerta. El capitán la siguió sin hacer más comentarios. «Esperaré a que se case -pensó para sí-. Ni un momento más, me ofrezca lo que me ofrezca.»

Magdalen se dirigió a él de nuevo al llegar a la puerta de la calle.

- Iremos por allí -dijo, señalando hacia el sur-, luego daremos la vuelta y nos los encontraremos como si volviéramos del paseo.

El capitán indicó que aprobaba el plan y siguió a Magdalen hasta la verja del jardín. Cuando ella fue a abrirla, llamó su atención una señora seguida por una niñera y dos niños, que se entretenían en el camino al otro lado del muro del jardín. La señora se sobresaltó, miró con ansiedad y sonrió para sí cuando salió Magdalen. A la hermana de Kirke la había ganado la curiosidad y había ido hasta Aldborough con el propósito expreso de ver a la señorita Bygrave.

Había algo en la forma del rostro de la señora, algo en la expresión de sus ojos negros, que recordó a Magdalen al capitán de la marina mercante cuya espontánea admiración la había molestado la tarde anterior. Al instante respondió al escrutinio de la desconocida con una mirada ceñuda y descortés. La señora enrojeció, devolvió la mirada con interés y se alejó lentamente.

«Una joven difícil, insolente y mala -pensó la hermana de Kirke-. ¿En qué estaría pensando Robert para admirarla de esa manera? Casi me alegro de que se haya ido. Espero y confío en que no volverá a poner sus ojos sobre la señorita Bygrave nunca más.»

- ¡Qué patanes son los de por aquí! -dijo Magdalen al capitán Wragge-. Esa mujer ha sido más grosera aún que el hombre de anoche. Se le parece. ¿Quién será?

- Lo descubriré ahora mismo -dijo el capitán-. Todas las precauciones son pocas con los desconocidos. -Rápidamente recurrió a sus amigos, los barqueros. Se hallaban cerca de allí y Magdalen oyó las preguntas y las respuestas con toda claridad.

- ¿Qué tal están ustedes hoy? -preguntó el capitán Wragge con su tono jocoso y afable-. ¿Y qué tal el viento? Noroeste y cuarta al oeste, ¿no es así? Perfecto. ¿Quién es esa señora?

- Es la señora Strickland, señor.

- ¡Ay, ay! La esposa del clérigo y hermana del capitán. ¿Dónde está hoy el capitán?

- Creo que de camino a Londres, señor. Su barco zarpa con destino a la China al final de la semana.

¡La China! Cuando el hombre pronunció esa palabra, Magdalen sintió una punzada del viejo dolor en el corazón. Aun siendo un extraño para ella, empezó a odiar la mera mención del nombre del capitán de la marina mercante. Él había perturbado sus sueños durante la noche y ahora, cuando con mayor desesperación y temeridad se había decidido a olvidar su existencia en el antiguo hogar, él había sido la causa indirecta de que recordara a Frank.

- ¡Vamos! -espetó a su compañero con enojo-. ¿Qué nos importan ese hombre ni su barco? Vámonos.

- Desde luego -dijo el capitán Wragge-. Mientras no tropecemos con amigos de los Bygrave, ¿qué nos importa nadie?

Echaron a andar en dirección al sur durante unos diez minutos o más, luego dieron media vuelta y se dirigieron al encuentro de Noel Vanstone y la señora Lecount.

CAPÍTULO IV

El capitán Wragge y Magdalen volvieron sobre sus pasos hasta hallarse de nuevo a la vista de Villa North Shingles antes de encontrar a la señora Lecount y a su amo. En ese momento, el vestido color lavanda del ama de llaves, la sombrilla y la pequeña y débil figura vestida de mahón que caminaba debajo se hicieron visibles en la distancia. El capitán aminoró el paso inmediatamente e instruyó a Magdalen con respecto a la conducta que debía seguir durante la inminente entrevista con estas palabras:

- No olvide sonreír -dijo-. En todos los demás aspectos no se preocupe. El paseo ha dado color a sus mejillas y ese sombrero le favorece. Mire a la señora Lecount a la cara, no se muestre turbada al hablar y, si el señor Noel Vanstone le presta especial atención, no le haga mucho caso mientras el ama de llaves la esté mirando. ¡Ojo! Me he pasado toda la mañana con los *Scientific Dialogues* de Joyce y estoy dispuesto a obsequiar a la señora Lecount con el resultado de mis estudios. Si no consigo desviar su atención de usted y de su amo, no doy un penique por nuestro éxito. Las banalidades no servirán con esa mujer, los cumplidos tampoco, ni las bromas; puede que un poco de ciencia a la medida le recuerde al difunto profesor y tengamos éxito. Debemos establecer un código de señales para que usted sepa qué tal me va. Observe este taburete de tijera. Cuando me lo cambie de la mano izquierda a la derecha, estará hablando Joyce. Cuando me lo pase de la derecha a la izquierda, estará hablando Wragge. En el primer caso, no me interrumpa: estaré preparando el terreno. En el segundo caso, diga lo que quiera: mis comentarios no tendrán la más mínima importancia. ¿Quiere que ensayemos? ¿Está segura de que lo comprende? Muy bien, cójase de mi brazo y ponga cara feliz. ¡Firme!, aquí están.

El encuentro se produjo casi a medio camino entre Sea-View Cottage y North Shingles. El capitán Wragge alzó el sombrero blanco de copa y abrió la conversación inmediatamente expresándose del modo más cordial.

- Buenos días, señora Lecount -dijo con la cortesía franca y jovial de un hombre sociable por naturaleza-. Buenos días, señor Vanstone; lamento ver que hoy no se encuentra usted bien. Señora Lecount, permítame que le presente a mi sobrina; mi sobrina, la señorita Bygrave. Mi querida niña, éste es el señor Noel Vanstone, nuestro vecino de Sea-View Cottage. Definitivamente tenemos que mostrarnos sociables en Aldborough, señora Lecount. Sólo hay un paseo (como mi sobrina acaba de comentarme ahora mismo, señor Vanstone), y en este paseo nos encontraremos todos por fuerza cada vez que salgamos. ¿Y por qué no? ¿Somos acaso personas ceremoniosas? Nada de eso: somos precisamente todo lo contrario. Usted tiene los modales desenvueltos propios del Continente, señor Vanstone, yo le igualo con la brusca cordialidad de un inglés a la antigua, las señoras se mezclan en armoniosa variedad como flores en el mismo arriate, y el resultado es un interés mutuo por hacernos más agradable la estancia junto al mar unos a otros. Disculpen mi animación, discúlpenme por sentirme tan alegre y jovial. El yodo en el aire marino, señora Lecount, ¡el conocido efecto del yodo en el aire del mar!

- Llegó usted ayer, ¿verdad, señorita Bygrave? -dijo el ama de llaves en cuanto el torrente de palabras del capitán llegó a su fin.

Dirigió estas palabras a Magdalen con un amable interés maternal por su juventud y su belleza, depurado por la respetuosa amabilidad que convenía a su situación al servicio de Noel Vanstone. Ni su rostro, ni su voz ni sus modales delataron la menor sombra de sospecha o de sorpresa mientras ella y Magdalen se miraban. Fue evidente desde el principio que el rostro y la figura auténticos que ahora veía no le recordaron el rostro y la figura falsos que había visto en Vauxhall Walk. Obviamente el disfraz había sido lo bastante bueno para desafiar la mirada penetrante de la señora Lecount.

- Mi tía y yo llegamos ayer por la tarde -dijo Magdalen-. Encontramos la última parte del viaje muy fatigosa. ¿Quizá también se lo pareció a ustedes?

Magdalen alargó deliberadamente su respuesta más de lo necesario a fin de descubrir, a

la mayor brevedad, el efecto que producía el sonido de su voz en la señora Lecount.

Los finos labios del ama de llaves conservaron su sonrisa maternal, sus modales afables no perdieron ni un ápice de su modesta deferencia, pero la expresión de sus ojos cambió súbitamente de una mirada atenta a otra inquisitiva. Magdalen dijo tranquilamente unas cuantas palabras más y volvió a esperar los resultados. El cambio se extendió gradualmente a todo el rostro de la señora Lecount: la sonrisa maternal se desvaneció y los modales afables dejaron traslucir una leve reserva. Aun así, no aparecieron indicios de una identificación definitiva; la expresión del ama de llaves siguió siendo lo que había sido desde el principio: una expresión inquisitiva y nada más.

- Hace unos minutos se quejaba usted de cansado, señor -dijo, abandonando toda conversación ulterior con Magdalen para dirigirse a su amo-. ¿Quiere usted entrar en casa y descansar?

Hasta entonces el propietario de Sea-View Cottage se había limitado a inclinar la cabeza, sonreír con afectación y admirar a Magdalen con los ojos entrecerrados. La súbita agitación de sus maneras y el color subido de su rostro menudo y marchito eran inconfundibles. Incluso el temperamento reptil de Noel Vanstone se calentaba bajo la influencia del sexo; era innegable que le gustaban las mujeres hermosas, y la gracia y la belleza de Magdalen no le pasaron inadvertidas.

- ¿Quiere usted entrar en casa y descansar? -dijo el ama de llaves repitiendo la pregunta.

- Todavía no, Lecount -dijo su amo-. Creo que me siento más fuerte. Creo que puedo continuar un poco más. -Se volvió sonriendo a Magdalen con expresión bobalicona y añadió en tono más bajo-: He hallado un nuevo objeto de interés en mi paseo, señorita Bygrave. No nos abandone o el interés se irá con usted.

Noel Vanstone sonrió de nuevo afectadamente para expresar la más alta aprobación por el ingenio de su propio cumplido; el capitán Wragge desvió hábilmente la atención del ama de llaves colocándose a su lado y hablándole al mismo tiempo. Los cuatro siguieron caminando despacio. La señora Lecount no dijo nada más. Mantenía el brazo de su amo fuertemente sujeto y miraba hacia el otro lado, donde estaba Magdalen, con la peligrosa expresión inquisitiva más marcada que nunca en sus bellos ojos negros. El cauto capitán Wragge no dejó de observar aquella mirada. Cambió el taburete de tijera indicador de la mano izquierda a la derecha y abrió fuego con sus baterías científicas en el acto.

- Una animada vista, señora Lecount -dijo el capitán, señalando cortesmente con el taburete de tijera el mar y los barcos que pasaban-. La grandeza de Inglaterra, señora, la auténtica grandeza de Inglaterra. ¡Le ruego que observe que muchos de esos navíos van sumamente cargados! A menudo me siento inclinado a preguntarme si el marinero británico es plenamente consciente, cuando lleva su carga a bordo, de la importancia hidrostática de la operación que ha realizado. Si a mí me transportaran de repente a la cubierta de uno de esos barcos (Dios no lo quiera, pues soy un pésimo marino) y si dijera a un miembro de la tripulación: «¡Jack!, has obrado maravillas, has comprendido la teoría de los cuerpos flotantes», ¡cómo me miraría el valiente muchacho! Y sin embargo, la vida de Jack depende de esa teoría. Si carga su nave una treintava parte más de lo que debe, ¿qué ocurre? Abandonará sin daño Aldborough, lo admito. Entrará en el Támesis, lo admito también, sin daño. Continuará por agua dulce y llegará incluso, pongamos que a Greenwich, y ¡a pique se irá! ¡A pique, señora, hasta el fondo del río, con toda certeza científica!

Aquí hizo una pausa, no dejando a la señora Lecount otra alternativa que requerir una explicación si no quería ser descortés.

- Con sumo placer, señora -dijo el capitán, ahogando con sus tonos más graves la débil voz de soprano con que Noel Vanstone requebraba a Magdalen-. Empezaremos, si le parece, con un principio básico. Todo cuerpo que flota en el superficie del agua desplaza una cantidad de líquido igual al peso de dicho cuerpo. ¡Bien! Ya tenemos

nuestro primer principio. ¿Qué se deduce de él? Es obvio que lo siguiente: que para mantener un barco a flote es necesario que ese barco y su carga tengan un peso menor que el peso de una cantidad de agua, ¡sígame atentamente aquí, se lo ruego!, de una cantidad de agua igual en masa a esa parte del barco que podría sumergirse en el agua sin peligro. Bien, señora, el agua salada tiene un peso específico treinta veces mayor que el agua dulce o de río, y un barco en el océano Alemán no se hundiría a tanta profundidad como un barco en el Támesis. En consecuencia, cuando cargamos nuestro barco con la vista puesta en el mercado de Londres, tenemos (hidrostáticamente hablando) tres alternativas. O bien lo cargamos con una treintava parte menos de lo que podemos transportar por mar, o sacamos de él una treintava parte de la carga en la desembocadura del río, o no hacemos ni una cosa ni otra y, como ya he tenido el honor de señalar, ¡a pique que nos vamos! -dijo el capitán cambiando de nuevo el taburete de tijera de la mano derecha a la izquierda para indicar que había acabado con Joyce por el momento-. Tal es, mi querida señora, la teoría de los cuerpos flotantes. Permítame añadir, para concluir, que se la ofrezco de todo corazón.

- Gracias, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. Me ha entristecido usted involuntariamente, pero no por ello la información que he recibido es menos valiosa. Hacía mucho, mucho tiempo, señor Bygrave, que nadie se dirigía a mí en el lenguaje de la ciencia. Mi querido marido me convirtió en su compañera; mi querido marido amplió mi cultura como usted ha intentado ahora ampliarla. Nadie se había molestado en mejorar mi intelecto desde entonces. Muchas gracias, señor. No ha desperdiciado su amable consideración hacia mí.

La señora Lecount suspiró con humildad quejumbrosa y aguzó el oído para oír la conversación que se mantenía al otro lado.

Un minuto antes, hubiera oído a su amo expresarse del modo más halagador sobre el tema del aspecto de la señorita Bygrave con su vestido para pasear junto al mar. Pero Magdalen había visto la seña del capitán Wragge con el taburete de tijera y había desviado de inmediato a Noel Vanstone hacia el tema de sí mismo y de sus posesiones con una oportuna pregunta sobre su casa de Aldborough.

- No deseo alarmarla, señorita Bygrave -fueron las primeras palabras de Noel Vanstone que captaron la atención de la señora Lecount-, pero sólo hay una casa segura en Aldborough, y esa casa es la mía. Puede que el mar destruya todas las demás; no podrá con la mía. Mi padre tuvo buen cuidado en ello; mi padre era un hombre extraordinario. Hizo construir la casa sobre pilotes. Tengo razones para creer que son los pilotes más resistentes de Inglaterra. Nada puede derribarlos. No me importa lo que haga el mar; no hay nada que pueda derribarlos.

- Entonces, si el mar nos invade -dijo Magdalen-, tendremos que correr a refugiarnos todos en su casa.

Noel Vanstone vio la ocasión para un nuevo cumplido; al mismo tiempo, el cauteloso capitán vio la ocasión para un nuevo arranque científico.

- Casi desearía que se produjera la invasión -murmuró uno de los caballeros-, para proporcionarme la felicidad de ofrecerle ese refugio.

- ¡Casi podría jurar que ha vuelto a cambiar el viento! -exclamó el otro-. ¿Dónde hay un hombre al que pueda preguntar? Oh, ahí hay uno. ¡Barquero! ¿De dónde sopla ahora el viento? Del noroeste y una cuarta al oeste todavía, ¿eh? Y del sureste y una cuarta al sur ayer por la tarde, ¿aja? ¿Hay algo más increíble, señora Lecount, que la variabilidad del viento en esta región? -prosiguió el capitán, cambiándose el taburete al lado científico-. ¿Hay algún otro fenómeno natural más desconcertante para el investigador científico? Me dirá usted que el fluido eléctrico que abunda en la atmósfera es la causa principal de esa variabilidad. Me recordará usted el experimento de aquel ilustre filósofo que midió la velocidad de una gran tormenta mediante el vuelo de pequeñas plumas. Mi querida señora, admito todas sus proposiciones...

- Le ruego que me disculpe, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. Me atribuye usted

amablemente unos conocimientos que no poseo. Lamento decir que esas proposiciones están totalmente fuera de mi alcance.

- No me interprete mal, señora -continuó el capitán, pasando por alto educadamente la interrupción-. Mis comentarios se aplican sólo a la zona templada. Colóqueme en las costas más allá de los trópicos, colóqueme donde el viento sopla hacia la playa de día y hacia el mar de noche, y al instante avanzaré hacia experimentos concluyentes. Por ejemplo, sé que el calor del sol durante el día rarifica el aire sobre la tierra y ocasiona el viento. Me desafía usted a demostrarlo. La acompaño escaleras abajo hasta la cocina (con su amable permiso); arrebato la fuente más grande que tenga de las manos de la cocinera; la lleno de agua fría. ¡Bien! Esa fuente de agua fría representa el océano. A continuación me apodero de uno de nuestros más valiosos utensilios domésticos, un plato para agua caliente; lo lleno de agua caliente y lo coloco en el centro de la fuente. ¡Bien de nuevo! El agua caliente representa la tierra que rarifica el aire sobre ella. Recuérdelo y déme una vela encendida. Yo sostengo la vela encendida sobre el agua fría y la apago de un soplo. Inmediatamente el humo se mueve de la fuente al plato. Antes de que tenga usted tiempo de expresar su satisfacción, enciendo la vela una vez más e invierto todo el proceso. Lleno la fuente de agua caliente y el plato de agua fría, vuelvo a apagar la vela de un soplo y esta vez el humo se mueve del plato a la fuente. El olor es desagradable, pero el experimento es concluyente. -Volvió a cambiar el taburete de tijera de mano y miró a la señora Lecount con su zalamera sonrisa-. No me hallará usted excesivamente prolijo, espero, señora -dijo con su alegre desenvoltura cuando el ama de llaves aguzaba una vez más el oído a la conversación del otro lado.

- Me asombra, señor, la amplitud de su información -dijo la señora Lecount, observando al capitán con cierta perplejidad, pero sin recelar de momento. Al ama de llaves le parecía un excéntrico, incluso para ser inglés, y seguramente un poco engreído de sus conocimientos. Pero al menos le había dedicado el cumplido implícito de dirigir esos conocimientos hacia ella, lo que agradecía tanto más por cuanto hasta entonces las personas con las que había tenido relación no habían tratado con demasiado respeto sus simpatías científicas hacia su difunto marido-. ¿Ha extendido sus investigaciones -prosiguió tras una breve vacilación- a la rama de la ciencia de mi difunto marido, señor? Lo pregunto tan sólo, señor Bygrave, porque (aunque sólo soy una mujer) creo que podría intercambiar ideas con usted sobre el tema de la creación reptil.

El capitán Wragge era demasiado astuto para poner a prueba su ciencia a la medida en terreno del enemigo. El viejo miliciano meneó la cauta cabeza.

- Un tema demasiado amplio, señora -dijo-, para un aficionado como yo. La vida y los trabajos de un filósofo como su marido, señora Lecount, advierten a hombres de mi calibre intelectual que no se midan con un gigante. ¿Puedo preguntarle -continuó el capitán, allanando sutilmente el camino para futuras relaciones con Sea-View Cottage- si posee usted algún recuerdo científico del difunto profesor?

- Poseo su tanque, señor -dijo la señora Lecount fijando modestamente la vista en el suelo- y uno de los objetos de sus estudios, un pequeño sapo extranjero.

- ¡Su tanque! -exclamó el capitán con tono de afligido interés-. ¡Y su sapo! Disculpe la brusca manera con que expreso mis sentimientos, señora. Posee usted un objeto de interés público y yo, como parte de ese público, admito mi curiosidad por verlo.

Las suaves mejillas de la señora Lecount enrojecieron de placer. El único lugar abordable en aquella naturaleza fría y reservada era el que ocupaba el recuerdo del profesor. El orgullo por los descubrimientos científicos de su marido y la mortificación al descubrir que eran poco conocidos fuera de su propio país eran sentimientos auténticos. Jamás el capitán Wragge había quemado su adulterado incienso en el débil altar de la vanidad humana, con un propósito mejor.

- Es usted muy bueno, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. Al honrar el recuerdo de mi marido, me honra usted a mí. Mas aunque usted tiene la amabilidad de tratarme en pie de igualdad, no debo olvidar que ocupo un empleo en el servicio doméstico. Sería un privilegio para mí mostrarle mis reliquias, si primero me permite pedir permiso a mi

amo.

Se volvió hacia Noel Vanstone, mezclada su intención sincera de realizar la petición propuesta con la celosa desconfianza de la impresión que Magdalen había producido sobre su amo, con esa extraña complejidad de motivos que se encuentra mucho más a menudo en una mujer que en un hombre.

- ¿Me permite hacerle una petición, señor? -preguntó la señora Lecount tras aguardar unos instantes para captar cualquier fragmento de charla afectuosamente personal que pudiera llegar hasta ella y tras haber sido de nuevo limpiamente vencida por Magdalen, gracias al taburete de tijera-. El señor Bygrave es una de las pocas personas en Inglaterra que aprecia el trabajo científico de mi marido. Me ha honrado solicitando ver mi pequeño mundo de reptiles. ¿Podría mostrárselo?

- Por supuesto, Lecount -dijo Noel Vanstone cortésmente-. Es usted una excelente criatura y me agrada complacerla. El tanque de Lecount, señor Bygrave, es el único tanque de Inglaterra. El sapo de Lecount es el sapo más viejo del mundo. ¿Vendrá usted a tomar el té a las siete? ¿Y convencerá usted a la señorita Bygrave para que le acompañe? Quiero que vea mi casa. No creo que tenga la menor idea de lo robusta que es. Venga a inspeccionar mi propiedad, señorita Bygrave. Le daré un palo y golpeará usted las paredes; irá usted arriba y pateará el suelo, y luego oirá usted cuánto ha costado todo eso. -El rabillo de sus ojos se llenó de arrugas taimadas y pronunció un nuevo discurso cariñoso al oído de Magdalen, encubierto por la voz omnipresente con que el capitán Wragge le daba las gracias por la invitación-. Venga puntualmente a las siete -susurró-, ¡y lleve ese encantador sombrero, por favor!

Los labios de la señora Lecount se cerraron ominosamente. Consideró a la sobrina del capitán como un grave inconveniente para el lujo intelectual de la compañía del capitán.

- Se fatiga usted, señor -dijo a su amo-. Éste es uno de sus días malos. Permítame que le recomiende que tenga cuidado; permítame que le niegue que volvamos ya.

Una vez conseguido su objetivo de invitar a sus nuevos conocidos a tomar el té, Noel Vanstone se mostró inesperadamente dócil. Reconoció que estaba un poco cansado y dio media vuelta inmediatamente obedeciendo el consejo de su ama de llaves.

- Cójase de mi brazo, señor, cójase de mi brazo por el otro lado -dijo el capitán Wragge cuando daban la vuelta. Sus ojos bicolores miraron a Magdalen significativamente mientras hablaba, advirtiéndole que no pusiera a prueba el aguante de la señora Lecount nada más empezar. Magdalen le comprendió perfectamente y, pese a que Noel Vanstone afirmó repetidas veces que no necesitaba el brazo del capitán, ella se colocó de inmediato junto al ama de llaves. La señora Lecount recobró su buen humor y entabló una nueva conversación con Magdalen haciéndole la única pregunta entre todas que, dadas las circunstancias, era la más difícil de contestar.

- Supongo que la señora Bygrave está demasiado cansada después del viaje para salir a pasear hoy -dijo la señora Lecount-. ¿Tendremos el placer de verla mañana?

- Seguramente no -contestó Magdalen-. Mi tía tiene una salud delicada.

- Un caso complejo, mi querida señora -añadió el capitán, consciente de que el aspecto de la señora Wragge (si la veían por accidente) contradiría del modo más patente lo que Magdalen acababa de decir sobre ella-. Está aquejada de una rara dolencia nerviosa que no se manifiesta exteriormente. Creería usted que mi mujer es la viva imagen de la salud si la viera y, sin embargo, las apariencias engañan hasta tal punto que me veo obligado a prohibirle toda emoción. No tiene trato social; lamento tener que decir que nuestro médico lo prohíbe tajantemente.

- Muy triste -dijo la señora Lecount-. La pobre señora debe de sentirse sola a menudo, sin duda, cuando usted y su sobrina no están con ella, ¿no es así, señor?

- No -respondió el capitán-. La señora Bygrave es una mujer hogareña por naturaleza. Cuando tiene fuerzas para ocuparse en algo, encuentra siempre recursos ilimitados en

la aguja y el hilo. -Tras haber alcanzado esta etapa de su explicación, y habiendo bordeado, por así decirlo, los límites de la verdad, en prevención de que la curiosidad del ama de llaves la llevara a indagar por su cuenta sobre la señora Wragge, el capitán tuvo el sentido común de sujetar su lengua y no entrar en más detalles-. He depositado grandes esperanzas en el aire de este lugar -comentó, para terminar-. El yodo, como ya he señalado, hace milagros.

La señora Lecount reconoció las virtudes del yodo con la elección de palabras más breve posible y se retiró al secreto santuario de sus propios pensamientos. «Aquí hay un misterio -se dijo-. Una señora que es la viva imagen de la salud, una señora que padece una compleja enfermedad nerviosa, y una señora cuya mano tiene la firmeza necesaria para hacer uso de hilo y aguja es un amasijo de contradicciones viviente que no acabo de comprender.»

- ¿Piensan ustedes quedarse mucho tiempo en Aldborough, señor? -añadió en voz alta, posando sus ojos momentáneamente en el rostro del capitán para examinarlo con detenimiento.

- Todo depende, mi querida señora, de la señora Bygrave. Confío en que nos quedaremos hasta el final del otoño. Imagino que ustedes se han instalado en Sea-View Cottage para toda la temporada, ¿no?

- Tendrá que preguntárselo a mi amo, señor. Es él quien decide, no yo.

La respuesta fue desafortunada. Noel Vanstone estaba enojado por el cambio de posiciones que le había separado de Magdalen. Atribuía ese cambio al entrometimiento de la señora Lecount y aprovechó la primera oportunidad para demostrar su rencor allí mismo.

- Yo no tengo nada que decir sobre nuestra estancia en Aldborough -espetó malhumoradamente-. Sabe usted tan bien como yo, Lecount, que todo depende de usted. La señora Lecount tiene un hermano en Suiza -continuó, dirigiéndose al capitán-. Un hermano que está gravemente enfermo. Si empeora, tendrá que ir a verlo. Yo no puedo acompañarla y tampoco puedo quedarme solo en la casa. Tendré que cerrarla y alojarme en casa de unos amigos. Todo depende de usted, Lecount, o de su hermano, que viene a ser lo mismo. Si dependiera de mí -continuó el señor Noel Vanstone, mirando a Magdalen intencionadamente desde el otro lado de la señora Lecount-, me quedaría en Aldborough todo el otoño con el mayor placer. Con el mayor placer -reiteró, repitiendo las palabras con una dulce mirada para Magdalen y un tono desdeñoso para la señora Lecount.

Hasta ese momento, el capitán Wragge había guardado silencio, sin dejar de anotar en su mente las prometedoras posibilidades de una separación entre la señora Lecount y su amo que el pequeño arrebato de irritación de éste había desvelado. Un temblor ominoso en los finos labios del ama de llaves cuando su amo expuso abiertamente sus asuntos familiares entre desconocidos, desafiando abiertamente sus celos, le aconsejó que debía intervenir. Si se permitía que el malentendido llegara a una situación extrema, existía la posibilidad de que se aplazara la invitación a Sea-View Cottage de la tarde. El capitán Wragge estuvo entonces, como siempre, a la altura de las circunstancias, y acudió al recurso de su útil información. Bajo los cultos auspicios de Joyce, se sumergió una vez más en el océano de la ciencia y extrajo de él una nueva perla. Aún seguía arengando (sobre la ciencia neumática esta vez) y mejorando el intelecto de la señora Lecount con su perseverancia más cortés y su verborrea más melosa, cuando el grupo de paseantes se detuvo ante la puerta de Noel Vanstone.

- ¡Válgame el cielo, si ya hemos llegado a su casa, señor! -dijo el capitán, interrumpiéndose en medio de una de sus gráficas frases-. No le entretengo más. ¡No se disculpe, señora Lecount, se lo ruego encarecidamente! Le expondré con mayor claridad ese curioso punto de la ciencia neumática en una ocasión futura. Mientras tanto, sólo me resta repetirle que puede realizar a su entera satisfacción el experimento que acabo de mencionar con una cámara de aire, un recipiente al vacío y una caja cuadrada. A las siete esta tarde, señor, a las siete, señora Lecount. Hemos disfrutado de

un paseo extraordinariamente agradable y de un intercambio de ideas muy instructivo. ¡Bueno, mi querida niña!, tu tía nos espera.

Cuando la señora Lecount avanzó para abrir la verja del jardín, Noel Vanstone aprovechó la oportunidad y lanzó una última mirada tierna a Magdalen bajo la protección de la sombrilla que había cogido con ese expreso propósito.

- No lo olvide -dijo con sonrisa meliflua-. ¡No olvide llevar ese encantador sombrero cuando venga esta tarde! -Antes de que pudiera añadir unas últimas palabras, la señora Lecount volvió a colocarse a su lado y la sombrilla protectora cambió de manos inmediatamente.

- ¡Una excelente mañana de trabajo! -le dijo el capitán Wragge a Magdalen cuando emprendieron el regreso a North Shingles-. Usted y yo y Joyce, hemos obrado maravillas. Hemos conseguido una cordial invitación el primer día que la buscamos.

Hizo una pausa esperando respuesta y, al no recibir ninguna, observó a Magdalen con mayor atención que hasta entonces. Su rostro volvía a estar lívido, miraba al frente como una autómata con desesperación temeraria e indiferente.

- ¿Qué ocurre? -preguntó el capitán, muy sorprendido-. ¿Está enferma?

Magdalen no contestó; ni siquiera parecía oírle.

- ¿Le preocupa la señora Lecount? -siguió preguntando él-. No existe el menor motivo de alarma. Puede que tenga la impresión de haber oído antes una voz parecida a la suya, pero su rostro la ha desorientado. Domine su genio y ella seguirá a oscuras. Manténgala a oscuras y me pondrá esas doscientas libras en la mano antes de que acabe el otoño.

Esperó de nuevo respuesta, y de nuevo ella guardó silencio. El capitán probó por tercera vez en otra dirección.

- ¿Ha recibido carta esta mañana? -prosiguió-. ¿Ha vuelto a tener malas noticias? ¿Se halla su hermana de nuevo en dificultades?

- ¡No mencione a mi hermana! -exclamó ella con vehemencia-. Ni usted ni yo somos dignos de hablar de ella.

Pronunció estas palabras junto a la verja del jardín y entró en la casa apresuradamente. Él la siguió y oyó que cerraba con violencia la puerta de su dormitorio, y que le daba dos vueltas a la llave con igual violencia. Tras aliviar su indignación con un juramento, el capitán Wragge entró en una de las salitas de la planta baja en busca de su mujer. La estancia se comunicaba con otra habitación más pequeña y oscura de la parte posterior de la casa a través de una singular puertecita con una ventana en su parte superior. El capitán se acercó en silencio a aquella puerta, levantó la cortina de muselina blanca que cubría la ventana y contempló la habitación interior.

Allí estaba la señora Wragge con la cofia ladeada y los zapatos en chancletas, una hilera de alfileres entre los dientes, el traje de cachemira oriental deslizándose lentamente hasta el suelo desde la mesa, las tijeras suspendidas en una mano insegura y las instrucciones de costura en otra mano vacilante, tan absorta en las dificultades invencibles de su labor que no se dio cuenta en absoluto de que en aquel momento era objeto de supervisión por parte de su marido. En otras circunstancias, la voz del capitán pronto la hubiera hecho percatarse de su situación. Pero el capitán estaba demasiado preocupado por Magdalen para perder el tiempo con su mujer tras convencerse de que se hallaba segura en su retiro y de que podía contar con que permanecería allí.

El capitán abandonó la salita y, después de una breve vacilación en el pasillo, subió furtivamente las escaleras y escuchó con inquietud a través de la puerta de Magdalen. Sus oídos no captaron más que un sonido apagado de sollozos, amortiguado por un pañuelo o ahogado entre sábanas. El capitán regresó de inmediato a la planta baja. Una leve sospecha de la verdad se abría paso por fin en su mente.

«¡Que el diablo se lleve a ese enamorado suyo! -pensó el capitán-. El señor Noel Vanstone ha evocado su fantasma nada más comenzar.»

CAPÍTULO V

Cuando Magdalen apareció en la salita poco antes de la siete, no era visible la menor huella de alteración en su persona. Tenía el mismo aspecto y hablaba tan tranquila y despreocupadamente como de costumbre.

La ceñuda desconfianza se borró del rostro del capitán Wragge en cuanto la vio. Había habido momentos durante la tarde en que había dudado seriamente de si tendría que pagar un alto precio por el placer de vengarse de Noel Vanstone y de la perspectiva de ganar doscientas libras, pues el incierto temperamento de Magdalen le hacía correr el riesgo de ser descubierto en cualquier momento. La prueba evidente de dominio que tenía ahora ante sí alivió sus pensamientos de tamaña inquietud. Poco le importaba al capitán que Magdalen sufriera en la intimidad de su dormitorio mientras saliera de él con un rostro que resistiera cualquier examen y una voz que no lo dejara traslucir.

De camino a Sea-View Cottage, el capitán Wragge manifestó su intención de formular al ama de llaves unas cuantas preguntas compasivas acerca de su hermano enfermo de Suiza. Opinaba que el estado crítico de la salud de dicho caballero podía ejercer una influencia determinante en el futuro progreso de la conspiración. Cualquier posibilidad de alejar al ama de llaves de su amo, señaló, era una posibilidad que merecía ser atentamente investigada dadas las circunstancias.

- Si conseguimos deshacernos de la señora Lecount en el momento oportuno -susurró el capitán cuando abría la verja del jardín de su anfitrión-, ¡nuestro hombre está atrapado!

Un minuto más tarde, Magdalen se hallaba de nuevo bajo el techo de Noel Vanstone, esta vez como invitada.

El procedimiento de la noche fue en su mayor parte una repetición del que habían desarrollado durante el paseo. Noel Vanstone osciló entre su admiración por la belleza de Magdalen y la alabanza de sus propias posesiones. Los inagotables arrebatos informativos del capitán Wragge -intercalados de preguntas, indirectas por delicadeza, con respecto al hermano de la señora Lecount- distrajeron continuamente la celosa vigilancia del ama de llaves sobre las maneras y el lenguaje de su amo. Así transcurrió la velada hasta las diez. Para entonces se había agotado la ciencia de manual del capitán y el genio del ama de llaves empezaba a aflorar a la superficie. Una vez más, el capitán Wragge avisó a Magdalen con una mirada y, pese a las hospitalarias protestas de Noel Vanstone, se levantó sensatamente para despedirse deseando las buenas noches.

- Tengo la información que quería -comentó el capitán de camino a casa-. El hermano de la señora Lecount vive en Zurich. Es soltero, posee una modesta fortuna y su hermana es su pariente más cercano. Si nos hiciera el favor de morirse de una vez, nos ahorraría un montón de problemas con la señora Lecount.

Era una agradable noche iluminada por la luna. Al pronunciar esas palabras, el capitán se volvió a mirar a Magdalen para comprobar si se había apoderado de ella su intratable abatimiento otra vez.

¡No! Su variable humor había cambiado una vez más. Miraba a un lado y a otro haciendo alarde de una animación febril; se mofó de la mera idea de que pudieran tener graves dificultades con la señora Lecount; imitó la voz chillona de Noel Vanstone y repitió sus piropos rimbombantes con la amarga alegría de ridiculizarlo. En lugar de entrar en la casa deprisa y corriendo como antes, caminó despreocupadamente junto a su compañero, tarareando retazos de canciones y lanzando a diestro y siniestro los pequeños guijarros sueltos del sendero del jardín. El capitán Wragge saludó el cambio operado en Magdalen como el mejor de los augurios. Creyó ver claros síntomas de que el espíritu familiar volvía de nuevo.

- Bueno -dijo cuando le encendió la bujía del dormitorio-, cuando mañana nos

encontremos todos en el paseo, veremos de dónde sopla el viento, como dicen nuestros náuticos amigos. Una cosa puedo decirle, mi querida niña, de poco me habrá servido abrir bien los ojos si no amenaza tormenta esta noche en la atmósfera hogareña del señor Noel Vanstone.

La habitual perspicacia del capitán no le había engañado. Tan pronto como se cerró la puerta de Sea-View Cottage tras partir los invitados, la señora Lecount se esforzó en hacer valer la autoridad que la influencia de Magdalen amenazaba ya.

El ama de llaves empleó todos los artificios en los que era experta para averiguar la verdadera posición de Magdalen en la estima de Noel Vanstone. Una y otra vez probó a sonsacarle inadvertidamente la confesión del placer que sentía ya en compañía de la hermosa señorita Bygrave; entró y salió serpenteando de cada una de las debilidades del carácter de su amo, igual que las ranas y tritones entraban y salían serpenteando de la pirámide de roca de su acuario. Pero cometió un grave error que casi todas las personas inteligentes son susceptibles de cometer cuando tratan con sus inferiores intelectuales: confió implícitamente en el desatino de un tonto. Olvidó que una de las cualidades humanas más viles, la astucia, es exactamente la habilidad que a menudo se desarrolla más en las naturalezas de menor intelecto. Si hubiera mostrado sinceramente su enfado, con seguridad habría asustado a su amo. Si le hubiera comunicado abiertamente sus pensamientos, le habría asombrado presentando una cadena de razonamientos a sus limitadas percepciones que éstas no habrían sido lo bastante agudas para comprender; la curiosidad de su amo le habría llevado a pedir una explicación y, jugando con esa curiosidad, podría haberlo tenido a su merced. El caso es que el ama de llaves opuso su astucia a la de su amo, y el idiota le dio ciento y raya. Noel Vanstone, para quien todas las motivaciones de amplias miras que había bajo el cielo eran misterios inescrutables, vio la motivación mezquina en el fondo de la conducta de su ama de llaves con una perspicacia tan inmediata como si hubiera sido un hombre de grandes facultades. La señora Lecount se despidió de su señor para ir a acostarse, frustrada y sabiéndose frustrada; se despidió de él dominada por su lado más feroz y con el rastrero anhelo en sus elegantes uñas de clavárselas en el rostro de su amo.

No era una mujer que se desanimara por una derrota ni por ciento. Estaba absolutamente decidida a pensar y repensar hasta dar con el medio de detener la creciente intimidad con los Bygrave de una vez por todas. En la soledad de su dormitorio recobró la sangre fría y se dispuso por primera vez a repasar las conclusiones a las que había llegado tras los acontecimientos del día.

Había algo que le resultaba vagamente familiar en la voz de aquella señorita Bygrave, pero al mismo tiempo, aunque fuera una inexplicable contradicción, también había algo que le resultaba extraño. El rostro y la figura de la joven eran completamente nuevos para ella. Eran un rostro y una figura atractivos, y si el ama de llaves hubiera visto alguno de los dos en alguna ocasión anterior, sin duda lo recordaría. La señorita Bygrave era indudablemente una desconocida y, sin embargo...

No había llegado más lejos durante el día, ni pudo ir más lejos ahora: la cadena de pensamientos se rompió. Su mente recogió los fragmentos y formó otra cadena que se unió a la señora que se mantenía recluida, a la tía, que parecía estar bien y sin embargo padecía de los nervios, que padecía de los nervios y sin embargo era capaz de usar hilo y aguja... Una incomprensible semejanza con una voz que no recordaba en la sobrina; una indescifrable enfermedad que mantenía a la tía alejada de la vida social; una amplísima cultura científica en el tío, asociada a una tosquedad e insolencia en los modales que en modo alguno sugerían la idea de un hombre enfrascado en el estudio: ¿eran en verdad los tres miembros de aquella pequeña familia lo que superficialmente parecían ser?

Con esta pregunta en la cabeza se acostó.

Tan pronto como apagó la bujía, la oscuridad pareció comunicar cierta perversidad inexplicable a sus pensamientos. Del presente derivaron al pasado, muy a su pesar; devolvieron a su antiguo amo a la vida; revivieron dichos y hechos olvidados en el

círculo inglés de Zurich; se acercaron hasta el lecho de muerte del anciano en Brighton; se trasladaron de Brighton a Londres; entraron en la habitación desnuda e incómoda de Vauxhall Walk; devolvieron el acuario a su lugar sobre la mesa de la cocina y colocaron a la falsa señorita Garth en una silla junto a él, evitando exponer sus ojos inflamados a la luz; colocaron de nuevo la carta anónima en sus manos, la carta que insinuaba una oscura conspiración y la llevaron con ella a la presencia de su amo; evocaron la discusión sobre el espacio en blanco en el anuncio y la pelea que le siguió cuando le dijo que la suma que había ofrecido era ridiculamente pequeña; revivieron una vieja duda que no la había preocupado desde hacía varias semanas: la duda de si la conspiración con que los amenazaban se había quedado en humo o si era probable que su amo y ella volvieran a oír hablar del asunto. En aquel punto sus pensamientos volvieron a romperse y se produjo un vacío momentáneo. Al minuto siguiente se incorporó en la cama de repente; el corazón le latía con fuerza y la cabeza le daba vueltas como si hubiera perdido el juicio. Un súbito destello y su cerebro encajó los múltiples pensamientos esparcidos y los colocó ante ella con una forma clara e inteligible. Dominada por la agitación del momento, dio una palmada al juntar las manos y exclamó de pronto en la oscuridad:

- ¡¡¡Otra vez la señorita Vanstone!!!

Se levantó de la cama y encendió la bujía una vez más. A pesar de que tenía los nervios bien templados, la conmoción de lo que barruntaba habían conseguido alterarlos. Su firme mano tembló cuando abrió su neceser y sacó de él un pequeño frasco de sal volátil. Pese a sus lisas mejillas y sus cabellos bien conservados, al mezclar el alcohol con agua se hizo patente la edad que tenía. Bebió la mezcla con avidez y, envolviéndose en la bata, se sentó en el borde de la cama para recobrar su calma habitual.

Fue totalmente incapaz de seguir el proceso mental que la había conducido al descubrimiento. No pudo distanciarse lo suficiente de sí misma para ver que sus vagas conclusiones con respecto a los Bygrave habían acabado convirtiendo a los miembros de aquella familia en blanco de sus sospechas, que la asociación de ideas le había hecho recordar inmediatamente después aquel otro motivo de sospecha representado por la conspiración contra su amo y que las dos ideas sobre aquellos diferentes motivos de recelo la habían iluminado al haberse relacionado de pronto. No fue capaz de seguir ese razonamiento desde el efecto hasta la causa. Tan sólo sentía que la sospecha se había convertido ya en algo más; la convicción no hubiera podido estar más firmemente arraigada en sus pensamientos.

Pensando en Magdalen bajo la nueva perspectiva en la que acababa de colocarla, la señora Lecount se habría convencido a sí misma de buena gana de que reconocía ciertos trazos del rostro y la figura de la falsa señorita Garth en la grácil y hermosa joven que se había sentado a la mesa de su amo hacía apenas una hora, de que ahora hallaba semejanzas en las que antes ni siquiera había pensado entre la voz airada que había oído en Vauxhall Walk y el tono suave y bien educado que aún persistía en sus oídos después de la experiencia de la velada precedente. De buena gana se habría convencido a sí misma de que había alcanzado tales resultados sin forzar indebidamente los hechos que ella conocía en realidad, pero el esfuerzo fue inútil.

La señora Lecount no era una mujer que gastara tiempo y energías en intentar convencerse a sí misma. Aceptó la conclusión inevitable de que un súbito acierto la había conducido al descubrimiento. Y, además, reconoció la sencilla verdad -por desagradable que fuera- de que, por el momento, carecía de un solo fragmento de prueba que apoyara la convicción que se había adueñado de su ánimo y la justificara en el ánimo de los demás.

En aquellas circunstancias, ¿cuál era la línea de conducta más segura que debía seguir con su amo?

Si le explicaba con franqueza, cuando volvieran a verse a la mañana siguiente, lo que había pasado por su cabeza aquella noche, su experiencia con Noel Vanstone le decía que sin duda se produciría uno de dos resultados. O bien se encolerizaría y se pelearía con ella, exigiendo pruebas y, al no ver aparecer ninguna, la acusaría de alarmarle sin

más motivo que los celos y con el propósito de alejarlo de Magdalen; o bien sufriría un serio sobresalto, clamaría la protección de la ley y pondría sobre aviso a los Bygrave, que estarían a la defensiva desde el principio. Si Magdalen hubiera sido la única implicada en la conspiración, esta última consecuencia no habría tenido excesiva importancia a los ojos del ama de llaves; pero viendo el engaño tal como lo veía ahora, su inteligencia era demasiado grande para no conceder su justo valor a la inagotable fuente de recursos del capitán. «Si no puedo enfrentarme con ese villano desvergonzado respaldada por pruebas claras -pensó la señora Lecount-, aunque mañana por la mañana abra los ojos de mi amo, el señor Bygrave se los cerrará de nuevo antes de que llegue la noche. Ese granuja juega con todas sus cartas bajo la mesa y ganará la partida con toda certeza si ve mi mano antes de empezar.»

La prudencia de aquella táctica de espera era tan manifiesta -pues era evidente que el taimado señor Bygrave se habría procurado, para un caso de emergencia, pruebas que demostraran la identidad que él y su sobrina habían adoptado para sus fines- que la señora Lecount decidió seguir su propio consejo a la mañana siguiente y esperó a poder presentar hechos indiscutibles antes de atacar la conspiración. Sólo hacía un día que su amo conocía a los Bygrave. No existía el temor de que se convirtiera en una intimidad peligrosa si ella permitía que continuara sólo unos días más y la atajaba radicalmente en una semana como mucho.

Durante ese espacio de tiempo, ¿qué medidas podía adoptar para eliminar los obstáculos que estorbaban su camino y proveerse de las armas que necesitaba?

Nuevas reflexiones le mostraron tres posibilidades diferentes a su favor, tres modos distintos de llegar a la revelación necesaria.

La primera posibilidad consistía en cultivar la amistad de Magdalen y luego tenderle una trampa por sorpresa para que se delatara a sí misma en presencia de Noel Vanstone. La segunda posibilidad consistía en escribir a la mayor de las señoritas Vanstone y pedirle (con alguna alarmante excusa para preguntárselo) información sobre el paradero de su hermana menor y sobre cualquier peculiaridad de su aspecto personal que permitiera identificarla a alguien que no la conociera. La tercera posibilidad era desvelar el misterio del aislamiento de la señora Bygrave y comprobar mediante una entrevista personal si la auténtica dolencia de la enferma no podía ser su incapacidad para guardar los secretos de su marido. Tras decidirse a probar las tres posibilidades en el orden en el que están aquí enumeradas y a tender su trampa a Magdalen durante el día que ya se acercaba, la señora Lecount se quitó por fin la bata y permitió a su naturaleza más débil que le implorara un poco de descanso.

El nuevo día despuntaba sobre el frío mar gris cuando volvió a acostarse. Su último pensamiento antes de quedarse dormida fue característico de aquella mujer y constituía una amenaza para el capitán. «Ha jugado frivolamente con la sagrada memoria de mi marido -se dijo la viuda del profesor-. ¡Por mi honor y mi vida que se lo haré pagar!»

A la mañana siguiente, temprano, Magdalen empezó el día -según había convenido con el capitán- sacando a la señora Wragge a hacer un poco de ejercicio a una hora en la que no habían de temer que llamaran la atención. La señora Wragge rogó y rogó que la dejaran quedarse en casa, pues tenía aún el traje de cachemira oriental metido en la cabeza y consideraba necesario leer las instrucciones de costura cuando menos por centésima vez antes de (para usar su propia expresión) «armarse de valor para meter las tijeras en la tela». Pero su compañera no aceptó la negativa y la señora Wragge se vio obligada a salir. El único propósito inocente en la vida que ahora poseía Magdalen era la determinación de que la señora Wragge no se convirtiera en una prisionera por su culpa, y a esa determinación se aferraba maquinalmente como al último resto reconocible que le quedaba de su mejor yo.

Regresaron a desayunar más tarde de lo habitual. Mientras la señora Wragge se encontraba arriba, enderezándose de los pies a la cabeza para someterse a la inspección de su metódico marido, y mientras Magdalen y el capitán la esperaban en la

salita, entró la criada con una nota de Sea-View Cottage. El mensajero aguardaba respuesta y la nota estaba dirigida al capitán Wragge.

El capitán abrió la nota y leyó estas líneas:

Querido señor:

El señor Noel Vanstone desea que le escriba para decirle que se propone disfrutar de este agradable día dando un largo paseo en coche hasta un lugar de esta costa llamado Dunwich. Está impaciente por saber si querría usted compartir los gastos del carruaje y proporcionarle el placer de su compañía y la de la señorita Bygrave en esta excursión. Amablemente se me autoriza a formar parte del grupo y, si se me permite decirlo sin faltar al decoro, añadiría que mi placer será tan grande como el de mi amo si usted y su sobrina aceptan unirse a nosotros. Tenemos intención de salir de Aldborough puntualmente a las once.

Su humilde servidora,

VIRGINIE LECOUNT

- ¿De quién es la carta? -preguntó Magdalen, notando un cambio en el rostro del capitán Wragge mientras la leía-. ¿Qué quieren de nosotros en Sea-View Cottage?

- Perdóneme -dijo el capitán con expresión grave-, esto exige ser meditado. Concédame un par de minutos para pensar.

El capitán dio unas cuantas vueltas a la habitación y de repente se dirigió a la mesa de un rincón, sobre la que se hallaba su recado de escribir.

- ¡No nací ayer, señora! -dijo el capitán, hablando burlonamente para sí. Guiñó el ojo marrón, empuñó la pluma y escribió la respuesta.

- ¿Puede hablar ahora? -inquirió Magdalen cuando la criada salió de la habitación-. ¿Qué decía la carta y cómo la ha contestado usted?

El capitán depositó la carta en sus manos.

- He aceptado la invitación -contestó tranquilamente.

Magdalen leyó la carta.

- Animosidad disimulada ayer -dijo-, y franca amistad hoy. ¿Qué significa esto?

- Significa -dijo el capitán Wragge- que la señora Lecount es más aguda de lo que yo pensaba. La ha descubierto a usted.

- Imposible -exclamó Magdalen-. Totalmente imposible en tan poco tiempo.

- No sé cómo la ha descubierto -prosiguió el capitán con absoluta serenidad-. Quizá recordaba mejor su voz de lo que nosotros suponíamos. O quizá, pensándolo bien, le hemos parecido una familia bastante sospechosa, y cualquier cosa sospechosa en la que estuviera envuelta una mujer le ha recordado aquella visita matinal que hizo usted a Vauxhall Walk. Sea como fuere, el significado de este súbito cambio es evidente. La ha descubierto y quiere poner a prueba su descubrimiento deslizando un par de preguntas embarazosas bajo la apariencia de una breve charla amistosa. Mi experiencia de la humanidad ha sido muy variada y la señora Lecount no es la primera intrigante con enaguas con la que he tenido que habérmelas. El mundo entero es un teatro, mi querida niña, y una de las escenas de nuestra pequeña obra acaba de cerrarse para siempre.

Tras pronunciar estas palabras, el capitán sacó su ejemplar de los *Scientific Dialogues* de Joyce del bolsillo.

- ¡Ya he terminado contigo, amigo mío! -dijo el capitán, dando una palmada de despedida sobre el útil libro divulgativo. Luego lo guardó bajo llave en el aparador-. ¡Tal es la popularidad humana! -continuó el indómito truhán, metiéndose la llave alegremente en el bolsillo-. Ayer Joyce lo era todo para mí. ¡Hoy no daría ni esto por él! - Hizo chasquear los dedos y se sentó a desayunar.

- No le comprendo -dijo Magdalen, mirándole con enojo-, ¿Piensa abandonarme a mis propios recursos a partir de ahora?

- ¡Mi querida niña! -exclamó el capitán Wragge-. ¿Todavía no se ha acostumbrado a mi pincelada de humor? He terminado con mi ciencia a la medida simplemente porque estoy convencido de que la señora Lecount ha dejado de creer en mí. ¿Acaso no he aceptado la invitación para Dunwich? Tranquilícese. La ayuda que le he prestado ya no es nada comparada con la que le voy a prestar ahora. Mi honor está comprometido en poner fuera de juego a la señora Lecount. Este último movimiento suyo lo ha convertido en una cuestión personal. ¡¡¡Esa mujer cree realmente que puede engañarme a mí!!! - exclamó el capitán golpeando la mesa con el mango del cuchillo en un arrebato de

virtuosa indignación-, ¡A fe mía que no me habían insultado tanto en toda mi vida! Acerque su silla a la mesa, querida, y preste medio minuto de atención a lo que tengo que decirle.

Magdalen le obedeció. El capitán Wragge bajó la voz como precaución antes de continuar.

- Siempre le he dicho -empezó- que era absolutamente necesario que no se dejara coger en Babia por la señora Lecount. Le digo lo mismo después de lo que ha ocurrido esta mañana. ¡Que sospeche de usted! La desafío a que encuentre el más pequeño fundamento para sus sospechas, a menos que la ayudemos nosotros. Hoy veremos si ha sido lo bastante estúpida para traicionarse hablando con su amo sin tener hechos que apoyaran sus afirmaciones. Lo dudo. Si se lo ha dicho, nosotros derramaremos pruebas de nuestra identidad como los Bygrave sobre la débil cabecita de Noel Vanstone hasta que le duela de tanto convencimiento. Tiene usted que hacer dos cosas durante esta excursión. En primer lugar, desconfiar de todo lo que le diga la señora Lecount. En segundo lugar, ejercer toda su fascinación y tener bien atado al señor Noel Vanstone a partir de hoy. Yo le daré la oportunidad cuando bajemos del carruaje para pasear por Dunwich. Póngase la pamela, lleve puesta la sonrisa, haga justicia a su figura y ajústese el corsé, póngase las botas más finas y los guantes más elegantes, asegúrese de que tiene a ese hombrecillo miserable bien agarrado a las faldas. Que se agarre bien y después déjeme a mí el resto. ¡Chitón!, ahí viene la señora Wragge, a partir de ahora tenemos que ser doblemente cuidadosos con ella. ¡Muéstreme la cofia, señora Wragge! ¡Muéstreme los zapatos! ¿Qué veo en ese delantal? ¿Una mancha? ¡No toleraré las manchas! Quíteselo después del desayuno y póngase otro. Coloque su silla en el centro de la mesa, más a la izquierda, más. Sirva el desayuno.

A las once menos cuarto, la señora Wragge fue desterrada a la habitación del fondo (de pleno acuerdo con sus propios deseos) para dejarse asombrar por la ciencia de la costura durante el resto del día. Cuando el reloj dio la hora, la señora Lecount y su amo llegaron puntualmente en carruaje a la verja de North Shingles y hallaron a Magdalen y al capitán Wragge esperándolos en el jardín.

Durante el trayecto hasta Dunwich nada perturbó el placer del paseo. Noel Vanstone disfrutaba de una excelente salud y estaba de muy buen humor. Lecount se había disculpado por el pequeño malentendido de la víspera; Lecount había pedido la excursión como un detalle hacia sí misma. Noel Vanstone pensó en aquellas concesiones y miró a Magdalen y no dejó de sonreír bobaliconamente todo el camino. La señora Lecount interpretó su papel a la perfección. Se mostró maternal con Magdalen y cariñosamente solícita con Noel Vanstone. Estaba muy interesada en la conversación del capitán Wragge y sufrió una pequeña decepción al descubrir que se volcaba en temas generales y excluía la ciencia. No se le escapó ni una mirada ni una sola palabra que aludiera en lo más mínimo a su auténtico propósito. Vestía con la acostumbrada elegancia y decoro, y fue la única del grupo, en aquel sofocante día estival, que conservó la frescura durante la parte más calurosa del viaje.

Cuando se apearon del carruaje al llegar a Dunwich, el capitán aprovechó un momento en que la señora Lecount no le prestaba atención para dar ánimos a Magdalen con una última advertencia.

- ¡Cuidado con el gato! -susurró-. Enseñará las uñas en el camino de vuelta.

Abandonaron la aldea y se encaminaron a las ruinas de un convento cercano, la última reliquia de la en otro tiempo populosa ciudad de Dunwich que ha sobrevivido durante siglos a la destrucción del mar voraz. Tras contemplar las ruinas, buscaron la sombra de un bosquecillo entre la aldea y las pequeñas dunas que dominan el océano Alemán. Allí el capitán Wragge se las arregló para dejar que Magdalen y Noel Vanstone se les adelantaran un trecho a la señora Lecount y a él, se equivocó de sendero e inmediatamente se perdió con consumada destreza. Tras deambular unos minutos (en la dirección equivocada), llegó a un claro cerca del mar y, abriendo el taburete de tijera cortésmente para que el ama de llaves se acomodara en él, propuso aguardar en el sitio a que los otros miembros del grupo pasaran por allí y los encontraran.

La señora Lecount aceptó la propuesta. Se había dado perfecta cuenta de que su acompañante se había perdido a propósito, pero ese descubrimiento no ejerció la menor influencia perturbadora sobre sus modales afables. Aún no había llegado el día de ajustar las cuentas al capitán; se limitó a añadir un nuevo apunte a su lista y a aprovechar el taburete de tijera. El capitán Wragge se tendió a sus pies en actitud romántica, y los dos enemigos resueltos (agrupados como dos amantes en un cuadro) entablaron una conversación tan desenfadada y agradable como si su amistad datara de veinte años atrás.

«¡La conozco, señora! -pensaba el capitán mientras la señora Lecount le hablaba-. Le gustaría pillarme en falso con mi ciencia de manual, ¡y no le importaría ahogarme en el tanque del profesor!»

«¡Villano con un ojo verde y otro marrón! -pensaba la señora Lecount mientras el capitán tomaba, a su vez el relevo de la conversación-. Por dura que tenga la piel, ¡aún he de atravesarla y clavarle mi aguijón!»

Con tal estado de ánimo siguieron charlando animadamente sobre temas generales, asuntos públicos, paisajes locales, sobre la sociedad en Inglaterra y la sociedad en Suiza, sobre salud, clima, libros, matrimonio y dinero; charlaron sin una sola pausa, sin un solo malentendido durante casi una hora, hasta que Magdalen y Noel Vanstone se desviaron por allí y volvieron a formar un grupo de cuatro.

Cuando llegaron a la posada donde les aguardaba el carruaje, el capitán Wragge cedió tranquilamente la posesión de Noel Vanstone a la señora Lecount e hizo señas a Magdalen de que se rezagara un momento para hablar con él.

- ¿Y bien? -preguntó el capitán en un susurro-. ¿Lo tiene bien agarrado a las faldas?

Magdalen tembló de pies a cabeza al dar su respuesta.

- Me ha besado la mano -dijo-. ¿Le dice eso bastante? ¡No deje que se siente junto a mí en el trayecto de vuelta! He soportado más de lo que puedo soportar; sálveme el resto del día.

- La pondré en el asiento delantero del carruaje -contestó el capitán-, a mi lado.

En el camino de vuelta, la señora Lecount confirmó la predicción del capitán Wragge y mostró sus uñas.

No podía haber elegido un momento mejor y difícilmente le habrían favorecido más las circunstancias. Magdalen tenía el ánimo decaído; estaba cansada física y mentalmente y se sentaba justo delante del ama de llaves, la cual, por culpa de esta nueva ubicación de Magdalen, se había visto obligada a ocupar el asiento de honor junto a su amo. Con todas las facilidades posibles para observar los cambios más sutiles en el semblante de Magdalen, la señora Lecount probó su primer experimento llevando la conversación al tema de Londres y a las ventajas relativas que ofrecían a sus residentes los diversos barrios de la metrópoli a ambas orillas del río. El siempre presto capitán Wragge descubrió sus intenciones antes de lo que ella esperaba e intervino inmediatamente. «Se dirige usted a Vauxhall Walk, señora -pensó el capitán-. Pues yo llegaré antes.»

Al punto inició una descripción totalmente ficticia de los barrios de Londres en los que él personalmente había residido y, mencionando hábilmente Vauxhall Walk como uno de ellos, salvó a Magdalen de una súbita pregunta relacionada con ese mismo sitio, con la que la señora Lecount se proponía sorprenderla para empezar. De sus lugares de residencia, el capitán pasó tranquilamente a sí mismo y llenó los oídos de la señora Lecount con una completa historia familiar (en el personaje del señor Bygrave), sin olvidar la tumba de su hermano en Honduras con el monumento del artista negro autodidacta, ni a la corpulenta viuda de su hermano en la planta baja de la casa de huéspedes de Cheltenham. Como medio para dar tiempo a Magdalen a serenarse, aquel arranque de información autobiográfica consiguió su objetivo, pero no sirvió para nada más. La señora Lecount escuchó sin creer una sola palabra de lo que le decía el capitán. Simplemente sirvió para reforzar su convicción de que era inútil contarle la verdad a

Noel Vanstone antes de que tuviera hechos que la respaldaran frente a la inexpugnable posición del capitán Wragge en la identidad que había asumido. El ama de llaves esperó tranquilamente a que el capitán hubiera acabado y luego volvió a la carga.

- Es una coincidencia que su tío haya residido en Vauxhall Walk -dijo, dirigiéndose a Magdalen-. El señor Noel tiene una casa en ese mismo lugar y vivíamos allí antes de venir a Aldborough. ¿Puedo preguntarle, señorita Bygrave, si conoce usted a una tal señorita Garth?

Esta vez formuló la pregunta antes de que el capitán pudiera intervenir. Magdalen debería haberse dado cuenta de lo que se avecinaba después de lo que acababa de hablarse en su presencia, pero tenía los nervios alterados por los acontecimientos del día y sólo pudo dar una respuesta negativa tras una breve pausa para dominarse. Su vacilación fue de una naturaleza demasiado pasajera para atraer la atención de una persona que nada sospechara, pero duró lo bastante para confirmar las convicciones personales de la señora Lecount y animarla a avanzar un poco más.

- Lo preguntaba -continuó, clavando los ojos en Magdalen y haciendo caso omiso de los esfuerzos del capitán Wragge por entrar en la conversación-, porque la señorita Garth es una extraña para mí y sentía curiosidad por descubrir cuanto pudiera sobre ella. El día antes de que abandonáramos la capital, señorita Bygrave, una persona que se presentó a sí misma con el nombre que acabo de mencionar nos visitó en circunstancias realmente extraordinarias.

Con maneras desenvueltas y zalameras, con un refinamiento del desprecio que era poco menos que diabólico por su ingeniosa usurpación del lenguaje de la piedad, pasó a describir audazmente el aspecto de Magdalen disfrazada en presencia de la propia Magdalen. Se refirió despreciativamente a los antiguos dueños de Combe-Raven como a personas que habían sido siempre motivo de enojo para la rama más antigua y respetable de la familia; se lamentó de que las hijas siguieran el ejemplo de sus padres e intentaran aprovecharse mercenariamente del señor Noel Vanstone adoptando la personalidad y el nombre de una persona respetable, para protegerse. Incluyendo astutamente a su amo en la conversación para evitar que el capitán consiguiera desviarla por aquel lado, no ahorrándose ni la más pequeña ofensa, hollando los lugares más sensibles donde una mujer rencorosa puede zaherir con su lengua viperina, hubiera conseguido sin duda su objetivo torturando a Magdalen hasta que se traicionara a sí misma, de no haber sido porque el capitán Wragge la detuvo en plena carrera con una fuerte exclamación de alarma y aferrando súbitamente la muñeca de Magdalen.

- ¡Mil perdones, mi querida señora! -exclamó el capitán-. Veo en el rostro de mi sobrina, noto en su pulso que vuelve a tener uno de sus violentos ataques de neuralgia. Mi querida niña, ¿por qué vacilas en confesar tu dolor cuando estamos entre amigos? ¡Qué momento para ser educada! Se le nota el sufrimiento en el semblante, ¿no es cierto, señora Lecount? Punzadas de dolor, señor Vanstone, punzadas de dolor en la sien izquierda. Bájate el velo, querida, y recuéstate sobre mí. Nuestros amigos sabrán disculparte; nuestros excelentes amigos sabrán disculparte el resto del día.

Antes de que la señora Lecount pudiera arrojar una sombra de duda sobre la autenticidad de la neuralgia, su amo manifestó su preocupación del modo más agitado y nervioso, tal como había previsto el capitán. Noel Vanstone detuvo el carruaje e insistió en que cambiaran inmediatamente de sitio, dejando el cómodo asiento de atrás para la señorita Bygrave y su tío y el asiento de delante para él y Lecount. ¿Llevaba Lecount su frasco de sales? ¡Excelente criatura! Que se lo diera inmediatamente a la señorita Bygrave y que el cochero condujera con cuidado. Si el cochero sacudía a la señorita Bygrave no recibiría ni medio penique. Con frecuencia el mesmerismo resultaba útil en aquellos casos. El padre del señor Noel Vanstone había sido el más eficiente mesmerizador de Europa y el señor Noel Vanstone era hijo de su padre. ¿Quería que la mesmerizara? ¿Quería que ordenara a aquel infernal cochero que parara en un lugar sombreado y apto para tal propósito? ¿Prefería asistencia médica? ¿Podía hallarse esa asistencia en algún lugar ante de llegar a Aldborough? Aquel idiota de cochero no lo sabía. ¡Que detuviera a todo hombre respetable que pasara en calesa y le preguntara si era médico! Así continuó el señor Noel Vanstone -con breves intervalos para coger aire-

en una escala de compasión y vanidad siempre ascendente, durante todo el camino de regreso.

La señora Lecount aceptó su derrota sin pronunciar palabra. Desde el momento en que el capitán Wragge la interrumpió, sus finos labios se cerraron y no volvieron a abrirse durante el resto del viaje. Las más vehementes expresiones de inquietud de su amo por la doliente señorita no produjeron ninguna manifestación externa de ira. Le prestó la mínima atención posible. No prestó ninguna al capitán, cuya exasperante consideración hacia el enemigo vencido le hizo mostrarse más cortés que nunca con ella. Cuanto más se acercaban a Aldborough, más fijamente clavaba la señora Lecount sus penetrantes ojos negros en Magdalen, que se hallaba recostada frente a ella con los ojos cerrados y el velo sobre la cara.

Sólo cuando el carruaje se detuvo en North Shingles y el capitán ayudaba a bajar a Magdalen, se dignó prestarle atención. Cuando el capitán sonrió y alzó el sombrero junto a la portezuela del carruaje, el firme aplomo del ama de llaves cedió de repente y le lanzó una mirada que aniquiló su cortesía en el acto. El capitán se dio la vuelta de inmediato, agradeciendo apresuradamente las últimas preguntas compasivas de Noel Vanstone y condujo a Magdalen a la casa.

- Le había dicho que enseñaría las uñas -dijo-. No es culpa mía que la haya arañado antes de que yo pudiera detenerla. No le ha hecho daño, ¿no?

- Me ha hecho daño, con cierto provecho -dijo Magdalen-. Me ha dado el valor para seguir adelante. Dígame lo que debe hacerse mañana, y créame que lo haré. -Suspiró profundamente al decir estas palabras y subió a su habitación.

El capitán Wragge entró en la salita con aire meditabundo y se sentó a reflexionar. No estaba en absoluto tan seguro como hubiera deseado sobre el futuro proceder del enemigo después de la derrota de aquel día. La mirada del ama de llaves al despedirse le había dado a entender claramente que no había agotado todavía sus recursos, y el viejo miliciano comprendió la importancia suma de prepararse a tiempo para contrarrestar de antemano su siguiente paso. Encendió un cigarro y concentró su precavida atención en los peligros que se avecinaban.

Mientras el capitán Wragge meditaba en la salita de North Shingles, la señora Lecount reflexionaba en su dormitorio de Sea-View. La exasperación por el fracaso de su primer intento de poner al descubierto la conspiración no le impedía ver la urgente necesidad de llevar a cabo el segundo antes de que el enamoramiento de Noel Vanstone escapara a su control. Tras haber fallado la trampa tendida a Magdalen, la siguiente posibilidad que debía probar era la de embaucar a su hermana. La señora Lecount ordenó que le sirvieran una taza de té, abrió su estuche de papel de escribir y empezó a redactar el borrador de una carta para enviársela a la mayor de las señoritas Vanstone en el correo de la mañana.

Así terminó la escaramuza de aquel día. El calor de la batalla aún tenía que llegar.

CAPÍTULO VI

La perspicacia humana tiene sus límites. Pese al acierto con que el capitán Wragge había dirigido sus pasos hasta entonces, ni siquiera su agudeza era ahora suficiente. Terminó el cigarro con la convicción mortificante de que el siguiente paso de la señora Lecount le pillaría totalmente desprevenido.

En tales circunstancias, su experiencia le aconsejaba que sólo había un camino seguro que seguir. Decidió probar el efecto desorientador de un cambio completo de táctica sobre el ama de llaves, antes de que ésta tuviera tiempo para atacarle en la oscuridad aprovechándose de su ventaja. Con este fin envió a la criada arriba para solicitar a la señorita Bygrave que bajara a hablar con él.

- Espero no molestarla -dijo el capitán cuando Magdalen entró en la salita-. Permítame que me disculpe por el olor a tabaco y que le diga un par de cosas sobre nuestro proceder a partir de ahora. Hablando con la franqueza que me caracteriza, la señora Lecount me tiene desconcertado y propongo que le devolvamos el detalle desconcertándola a ella. El plan que voy a sugerir es muy simple. Ya he tenido el honor de darle a usted una grave neuralgia, y le pido permiso (cuando el señor Noel Vanstone envíe a alguien a preguntar por usted mañana por la mañana) para tomarme la libertad de meterla en la cama definitivamente. Pregunta de Sea-View Cottage: «¿Qué tal se encuentra la señorita Bygrave esta mañana?». Respuesta de North Shingles: «Mucho peor. La señorita Bygrave tiene que guardar cama». Pregunta repetida día tras día, pongamos que durante una quincena: «¿Qué tal se encuentra la señorita Bygrave?». Respuesta repetida durante el mismo tiempo, si es necesario: «Igual». ¿Podrá soportar el encierro? No veo objeción a que salga a tomar el aire a primera hora de la mañana o a última hora, por la noche. Pero el resto del día, no queda otro remedio, tendrá que colocarse en la misma categoría que la señora Wragge y permanecer en su habitación.

- ¿Con qué fin desea que haga eso? -inquirió Magdalen.

- Con un doble fin -respondió el capitán-. Mi propia estupidez me hace sonrojar, pero el hecho es que no acierto a adivinar cuál pueda ser el siguiente movimiento de la señora Lecount. Lo único de lo que estoy seguro es de que volverá a intentar abrirle los ojos a su amo. Sean cuales sean los medios que emplee para descubrir su identidad, es necesario que exista una comunicación personal con usted para alcanzar sus objetivos. Muy bien. Si impido esa comunicación, pongo un obstáculo en su camino desde el principio, o, como decimos jugando a las cartas, fuerzo su mano. ¿Ve adonde quiero ir a parar?

Magdalen lo veía perfectamente. El capitán prosiguió.

- La segunda razón que tengo para encerrarla -dijo- tiene relación exclusivamente con el amo de la señora Lecount. El crecimiento del amor, mi querida niña, es, en un aspecto, diferente de los demás crecimientos; el amor florece en circunstancias adversas. Nuestro primer plan era hacer sentir al señor Noel Vanstone el placer de su compañía. La siguiente consiste en volverle loco con su pérdida. Yo hubiera propuesto unos cuantos encuentros más para favorecer nuestros fines de no ser por nuestra crítica posición actual con respecto a la señora Lecount. Sea como fuere, habremos de confiar en el efecto que produjo usted ayer y probar el experimento de una súbita separación antes de lo que yo hubiera deseado. Yo veré al señor Noel Vanstone, en cambio, ¡y si hay algún lugar en carne viva situado en los alrededores del corazón de ese caballero, puede dar por seguro que me lanzaré sobre él! Le he hecho saber a usted todas mis opiniones. Tómese su tiempo para reflexionar y déme una respuesta: sí o no.

- Cualquier cambio será para mejor -dijo Magdalen-, ¡si me aleja de la compañía de la señora Lecount y de su amo! Que sea como usted quiere.

Magdalen había hablado hasta entonces con voz ahogada y cansina, pero estas últimas palabras las pronunció elevando el tono de voz y enrojeciendo, síntomas que advirtieron

al capitán de que no debía seguir presionándola.

- Muy bien -dijo el capitán-. Como de costumbre, nos hemos entendido. Veo que está cansada y no la entretendré más.

Se levantó para abrir la puerta, se detuvo a medio camino y volvió.

- Déjeme a mí que arregle las cosas con la criada -prosiguió-. Usted no puede permanecer en cama todo el tiempo y tendremos que comprar la discreción de la chica cuando responda a la puerta, sin contarle nada, claro está. Le haré comprender que ha de decir que está usted enferma igual que podría decir que no está en casa, como forma de evitar visitas no deseadas. Permítame que le abra la puerta. Perdone, pero se dirige usted a la habitación donde trabaja la señora Wragge en lugar de subir a su dormitorio.

- Ya lo sé -dijo Magdalen-. Deseo sacar a la señora Wragge de la mísera habitación en la que se halla ahora y llevarla arriba conmigo.

- ¿Para pasar la tarde?

- Para pasar toda la quincena.

El capitán entró en el comedor detrás de Magdalen y cerró la puerta cautamente antes de volver a hablar.

- ¿Piensa en serio imponerse a sí misma la presencia de mi mujer durante una quincena? -preguntó con gran sorpresa por su parte.

- Su mujer es la única criatura inocente en esta casa culpable -espetó Magdalen con vehemencia-. ¡Ha de estar y estará conmigo!

- Por favor, no se altere -dijo el capitán-. Llévese a la señora Wragge, por supuesto. Yo no la quiero. -Tras haber cedido a la compañera de su existencia en estos términos, regresó a la salita discretamente. «¡La debilidad de su sexo! -pensó el capitán, dándose unos golpecitos en su sagaz cabeza-. Pon a prueba el intelecto femenino y se dejará llevar de inmediato por el temperamento femenino.»

La prueba a la que aludía el capitán no se limitó esa noche al intelecto femenino de North Shingles, sino que se extendió al intelecto femenino de Sea-View. La señora Lecount permaneció sentada en su escritorio durante casi dos horas, escribiendo, corrigiendo y volviendo a escribir, antes de obtener una carta para la mayor de las señoritas Vanstone que cumpliera exactamente el objetivo requerido. Por fin terminó el borrador a su entera satisfacción y lo pasó a limpio en seguida para mandarlo por correo al día siguiente.

La carta así redactada era una obra maestra del ingenio. Después de unas cuantas frases preliminares, el ama de llaves informaba a Norah con toda claridad de la aparición de la visitante disfrazada en Vauxhall Walk, de la conversación mantenida durante la entrevista y de su sospecha de que la persona que afirmaba ser la señorita Garth era, con toda probabilidad, la menor de las señoritas Vanstone en persona. Una vez contada la verdad, la señora Lecount continuaba diciendo que su amo tenía pruebas que justificarían plenamente la aplicación de la ley, que estaba enterado de que la conspiración con que le habían amenazado se había puesto en marcha en Aldborough, y que únicamente vacilaba en protegerse a sí mismo por respeto a consideraciones familiares y con la esperanza de que la mayor de las señoritas Vanstone pudiera influir en su hermana hasta el punto de hacer innecesario recurrir a medidas extremas.

En tales circunstancias (continuaba la carta) se imponía sin duda poder identificar debidamente a la visitante disfrazada de Vauxhall Walk, pues si la conjetura de la señora Lecount resultaba ser falsa y si la persona en cuestión era una desconocida, el señor Noel Vanstone estaba resuelto a entablar acciones legales para defenderse. Ciertos sucesos en Aldborough sobre los que no era necesario hablar permitirían a la señora Lecount ver a la persona sospechosa con su apariencia auténtica en unos pocos días, pero dado que el ama de llaves desconocía por completo el aspecto de la menor de las

señoritas Vanstone, obviamente era deseable que alguna otra persona mejor informada pudiera tomar el asunto en sus manos sobre ese particular. Si la mayor de las señoritas Vanstone estaba casualmente en libertad de ir a Aldborough en persona, ¿tendría la amabilidad de confirmárselo por carta?; la señora Lecount volvería a escribirle para fijar un día. Si, por otro lado, a la señorita Vanstone le era imposible emprender el viaje, la señora Lecount sugería que respondiera con una descripción física de su hermana lo más completa posible, mencionando cualquier peculiaridad que pudiera existir en forma de marcas en la cara o las manos y comunicándole (en el caso de que le hubiera escrito recientemente) cuál era la dirección de su última carta, y si no llevaba, de dónde era el matasellos. Con la ayuda de esta información, la señora Lecount aceptaría la responsabilidad de identificarla discretamente, en bien de la propia y desafortunada señorita, y volvería a escribir a su hermana mayor para hacerla partícipe del resultado.

La señora Lecount resolvió con facilidad el problema de saber adonde enviar su carta. Recordaba el nombre del abogado que había defendido la causa de las dos hermanas en la época de Michael Vanstone, por lo que dirigió la carta a «Señor Pendril, para entregar a la señorita Vanstone, Londres». Esta carta la metió en un segundo sobre dirigido al abogado del señor Noel Vanstone con una nota para pedir al citado caballero que la enviara inmediatamente al despacho del señor Pendril.

«Ahora -pensó la señora Lecount cuando guardó la carta bajo llave en su escritorio con miras a echarla al correo por su propia mano al día siguiente-, ¡ahora ya la tengo!»

A la mañana siguiente, la sirvienta de Sea-View se presentó con los saludos de su amo para interesarse por la salud de la señorita Bygrave. El capitán Wragge anunció su boletín debidamente: la señorita Bygrave estaba tan enferma que se veía obligada a guardar cama.

Al recibir esta noticia, la preocupación de Noel Vanstone le llevó a visitar North Shingles en persona cuando salió a dar su paseo vespertino. La señorita Bygrave no había mejorado. Noel Vanstone pidió ver al señor Bygrave. El digno capitán había previsto tal contingencia. Pensó que un poco de irritante incertidumbre no haría ningún daño a Noel Vanstone y encargó cuidadosamente a la criada que diera la siguiente respuesta en caso de necesidad: «El señor Bygrave rogaba que lo excusara; no podía atender a nadie».

El segundo día se formuló la misma pregunta mediante un mensaje por la mañana y a través del propio Noel Vanstone por la tarde. La respuesta de la mañana (con respecto a Magdalen) fue: «Una pizca mejor». La respuesta de la tarde (con respecto al capitán Wragge) fue: «El señor Bygrave acaba de salir». Esa noche, el humor de Noel Vanstone era muy inestable y la paciencia y el tacto de la señora Lecount sufrieron una dura prueba en su esfuerzo por evitar ofenderle.

La tercera mañana, el informe sobre la señorita enferma fue menos favorable. «La señorita Bygrave seguía muy mal y no podía levantarse.» La sirvienta que regresaba a Sea-View con este mensaje se encontró con el cartero y entró en el comedor con dos cartas dirigidas a la señora Lecount.

La letra de la primera carta era familiar al ama de llaves. Se la enviaba el médico que atendía a su hermano enfermo en Zurich y le anunciaba que el paciente había evolucionado de manera tan favorable que existían las mayores posibilidades de que salvara la vida.

La dirección de la segunda carta estaba escrita con una letra desconocida. La señora Lecount dedujo que se trataba de la respuesta de la señorita Vanstone y se la guardó para leerla después del desayuno, momento en que pudo retirarse a su habitación.

Abrió la carta, miró de inmediato el nombre al pie y se sorprendió un poco al leerlo. La firma no era «Norah Vanstone», sino «Harriet Garth».

La señorita Garth anunciaba que la mayor de las señoritas Vanstone había aceptado, hacía una semana, un empleo de institutriz sujeto a la condición de que se reuniera con

la familia que la contrataba en su residencia temporal del sur de Francia y que regresaría con ellos cuando volvieran a Inglaterra, seguramente al cabo de un mes o seis semanas. Durante el intervalo de aquella inevitable ausencia, la señorita Vanstone había pedido a la señorita Garth que abriera todas sus cartas; tal disposición tenía el fin principal de procurar una respuesta rápida a cualquier comunicación que pudiera llegarle de su hermana. La señorita Magdalen Vanstone no había escrito desde mediados de julio -ocasión en la que el matasellos del sobre indicaba que la carta había sido enviada desde Londres, distrito de Lambeth- y su hermana mayor había abandonado Inglaterra en un estado de grandísima angustia por su causa.

Tras dar estas explicaciones, la señorita Garth pasaba a señalar que circunstancias familiares le impedían viajar personalmente hasta Aldborough para ayudar a la señora Lecount, pero podía proporcionarle un sustituto mucho más capacitado para el caso en todos los aspectos, en la persona del señor Pendril. Este caballero conocía bien a la señorita Magdalen Vanstone y su experiencia profesional y su discreción harían su ayuda doblemente valiosa. El señor Pendril había accedido con toda amabilidad a viajar hasta Aldborough cuando se considerara necesario, pero, dado que su tiempo era muy valioso, la señorita Garth solicitaba encarecidamente que no le hicieran viajar hasta que la señora Lecount estuviera completamente segura del día en que podían requerirse sus servicios.

Al tiempo que proponía este plan, la señorita Garth añadía que le parecía correcto proporcionarle también una descripción escrita de la menor de las señoritas Vanstone. Podía producirse una emergencia que no diera tiempo a la señora Lecount de aprovechar los servicios del señor Pendril, y la ejecución de las intenciones del señor Noel Vanstone hacia la desdichada joven que era objeto de su indulgencia podría verse fatalmente retrasada por alguna imprevista dificultad para establecer su identidad. En tales circunstancias, le transmitía a continuación la descripción personal, que no omitía ninguna peculiaridad que pudiera hacer reconocible a Magdalen, incluyendo los «dos lunares pequeños, muy juntos, en el lado izquierdo del cuello» que se habían mencionado anteriormente en los carteles impresos enviados a York.

Por último, la señorita Garth expresaba el temor de que probablemente las sospechas de la señora Lecount resultaran ser ciertas. Sin embargo, mientras existiera la más mínima posibilidad de que se descubriera que era una desconocida quien dirigía la conspiración, la señorita Garth se sentía obligada por su gratitud hacia el señor Noel Vanstone a ayudarle en el proceso legal que, en ese caso, se entablaría. Adjuntaba, por tanto, la negativa formal -que repetiría en persona si era necesario- de que existiera relación alguna entre ella y la persona disfrazada que había hecho uso de su nombre. Ella era la señorita Garth que había ejercido de institutriz del difunto señor Andrew Vanstone y jamás había estado en Vauxhall Walk ni en sus cercanías.

Con esta negación, y las fervorosas promesas por parte de la remitente de que haría en favor de Magdalen cuanto hubiera hecho su hermana de hallarse en Inglaterra, concluía la carta. Llevaba la firma con todas sus letras y estaba fechada con la metódica precisión que para tales cuestiones siempre había caracterizado a la señorita Garth.

Esta carta colocó un arma formidable en las manos del ama de llaves.

Le proporcionaba los medios para establecer la identidad de Magdalen mediante la intervención de un abogado profesional. Contenía una descripción personal lo bastante minuciosa para ser utilizada ventajosamente si era necesario antes de la aparición del señor Pendril. Ofrecía una denuncia contra la falsa señorita Garth firmada por la auténtica y establecía el hecho de que la última carta recibida por la mayor de las señoritas Vanstone de su hermana menor había sido echada al correo (y por lo tanto seguramente escrita) en las cercanías de Vauxhall Walk. Si se hubiera recibido alguna otra carta con el matasellos de Aldborough, la cadena de pruebas en lo referente a los lugares habría sido más completa, indudablemente; pero, de todas formas, tenía testimonios suficientes (a los que podía añadirse el pedazo de vestido marrón de alpaca que aún tenía la señora Lecount en su poder) para alzar el velo que ocultaba la conspiración y colocar al señor Noel Vanstone frente a la sencilla y abrumadora verdad.

El único obstáculo que se interponía en el plan de acción inmediata de la señora Lecount era la reclusión de la señorita Bygrave en aquellos momentos. Tenía que decidir la cuestión de cómo acceder a ella en persona antes de que pudiera comunicarse con el señor Pendril. La señora Lecount se puso un sombrero inmediatamente y se fue de visita a North Shingles para probar qué descubrimientos podía hacer por sí misma antes de que llegara la hora en que salía el correo.

En aquella ocasión, el señor Bygrave se hallaba en casa y la señora Lecount pudo entrar sin dificultad.

Tras prudentes reflexiones durante la mañana, el capitán Wragge había decidido llevar las cosas un poco más cerca del punto decisivo. Los medios por los cuales se proponía lograr este resultado exigían que viera al ama de llaves y a su amo por separado, para sembrar la discordia produciendo en ellos dos impresiones completamente opuestas sobre sí mismo. Por consiguiente, en lugar de causarle el menor embarazo, la visita de la señora Lecount fue el acontecimiento más grato que podía haber deseado. La recibió en la salita con unos modales acusadamente secos para los que ella no estaba preparada en absoluto. La sonrisa zalamera del capitán había desaparecido y en su lugar mostraba un semblante solemne e impenetrable.

- Me he atrevido a molestarle, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-, para expresarle el pesar con el que mi amo y yo recibimos las noticias de la enfermedad de la señorita Bygrave. ¿No ha mejorado?

- No, señora -respondió el capitán lo más sucintamente posible-. Mi sobrina no está mejor.

- Yo tengo cierta experiencia como enfermera, señor Bygrave. Si pudiera ser de utilidad…

- Gracias, señora Lecount. No hay necesidad de que abusemos de su amabilidad.

Esta sencilla respuesta fue seguida de un momento de silencio. El ama de llaves estaba algo perpleja. ¿Qué se había hecho de la rebuscada cortesía del señor Bygrave y de su verbosidad? ¿Acaso quería ofenderla? Si era así, la señora Lecount resolvió en aquel momento que no conseguiría su objetivo.

- ¿Puedo preguntar por la naturaleza de la enfermedad? -insistió-. Espero que no esté relacionada con nuestra excursión a Dunwich.

- Lamento decir, señora -respondió el capitán-, que empezó con aquel ataque de neuralgia en el carruaje.

«¡Vaya, vaya! -pensó la señora Lecount-. Ni siquiera intenta hacerme creer que la enfermedad es real; se ha quitado la máscara desde el principio.»

- ¿Es una dolencia nerviosa, señor? -añadió en voz alta.

El capitán respondió asintiendo solemnemente con la cabeza.

- ¿Entonces tiene usted a dos enfermas de los nervios en la casa, señor Bygrave?

- Sí, señora, a dos. Mi mujer y mi sobrina.

- Qué extraña coincidencia de desgracias.

- Ciertamente, señora. Muy extraña.

Pese a que la señora Lecount estaba decidida a no ofenderse, la exasperante insensibilidad del capitán Wragge a cada uno de los ataques que le lanzaba empezó a causarle enojo. Fue consciente de cierta pequeña dificultad para conservar la sangre fría antes de poder seguir hablando.

- ¿No hay posibilidad -continuó- de que la señorita Bygrave pueda abandonar su

habitación próximamente?

- Ninguna en absoluto, señora.

- Supongo que está usted satisfecho con la asistencia médica que recibe.

- No recibe asistencia médica -dijo el capitán tranquilamente-. Yo mismo llevo este caso.

El veneno que acumulaba la señora Lecount se desbordó ante aquella respuesta y afloró a sus labios.

- ¿Debo suponer que sus superficiales conocimientos científicos -dijo con una sonrisa malévola- incluyen también algo de medicina, señor?

- Efectivamente, señora -respondió el capitán, impertérrito-. Sé tanto de una cosa como de la otra.

El tono con que pronunció estas palabras no dejó más que una alternativa digna a la señora Lecount: se levantó para dar por concluida la entrevista. En aquel momento la tentación fue demasiado fuerte y no pudo resistirse a proyectar una sombra de amenaza sobre el capitán Wragge al despedirse.

- No le daré las gracias, señor, por el modo en que me ha recibido -dijo- hasta que pueda pagar provechosamente mi deuda de gratitud. Mientras tanto, me alegra deducir, por la ausencia de asistencia médica en la casa, que la enfermedad de la señorita Bygrave es mucho menos grave de lo que suponía antes de venir a esta casa.

- Jamás contradigo a una dama, señora -replicó el incorregible capitán-. Si le complace creer, cuando volvamos a encontrarnos, que mi sobrina está completamente sana, me someteré resignadamente a la expresión de su parecer. -Con estas palabras siguió al ama de llaves hasta el pasillo y le abrió cortésmente la puerta. «¡He visto el truco, señora! -se dijo cuando volvió a cerrarla-. ¡La baza que tiene en la mano es ver a mi sobrina, y yo me ocuparé de que no pueda jugarla!»

Regresó a la salita y aguardó tranquilamente el suceso que había de producirse con toda probabilidad: la visita del amo de la señora Lecount. En menos de una hora se confirmó la predicción del capitán Wragge y Noel Vanstone entró en la casa.

- ¡Mi querido señor! -exclamó el capitán, estrechando cordialmente la mano reacia de su visitante-. Sé a qué ha venido. La señora Lecount le ha hablado de su visita y sin duda ha afirmado que la enfermedad de mi sobrina es un mero subterfugio. Está usted sorprendido, se siente herido, sospecha que estoy jugando con su amable interés; en resumen, exige una explicación. Pues bien, la tendrá. Tome asiento, señor Vanstone. Estoy a punto de confiarme a su sentido común y a su buen juicio como hombre de mundo. Reconozco que nos hallamos en una posición falsa, señor, y he de decirle con toda franqueza desde un principio que su ama de llaves es la causa.

Por una vez en la vida, Noel Vanstone abrió los ojos.

- ¡Lecount! -exclamó, absolutamente atónito.

- La misma, señor -dijo el capitán Wragge-. Me temo que he ofendido a la señora Lecount cuando ha venido esta mañana por una falta de cordialidad en mis modales. Soy un hombre sencillo y no puedo fingir lo que no siento. Lejos de mi ánimo pronunciar una sola palabra en contra del carácter de su ama de llaves. Sin duda es una excelente mujer digna de toda confianza, pero adolece de un grave defecto común a las personas de su edad y posición: es celosa de la influencia que tiene sobre su amo, aunque quizá usted no lo haya observado.

- Disculpe -le interrumpió Noel Vanstone-, pero soy un gran observador. No se me escapa nada.

- En ése caso, señor -prosiguió el capitán-, sin duda habrá notado que la señora Lecount

ha permitido que sus celos influyeran en la conducta de usted hacia mi sobrina.

Noel Vanstone pensó en su duelo doméstico con la señora Lecount cuando sus invitados abandonaron Sea-View, y no supo dar con una respuesta directa. Expresó una grandísima sorpresa y también su pesar; pensaba que Lecount se había esforzado por mostrarse agradable durante la excursión a Dunwich; esperaba y confiaba en que se tratara de un desafortunado error.

- ¿Quiere usted decir, señor -continuó el capitán con tono severo-, que no se ha fijado usted en esa circunstancia? ¡Como hombre de honor y buen observador no puede decirme que no! La cortesía superficial de su ama de llaves no ha ocultado sus auténticos sentimientos. Mi sobrina lo ha visto, como lo ha visto usted y lo he visto yo. Mi sobrina, señor Vanstone, es una joven sensible y animosa, y se ha negado rotundamente a cultivar la compañía de la señora Lecount en el futuro. ¡No me interprete mal! Para mi sobrina, al igual que para mí, la atracción de su compañía, señor Vanstone, sigue siendo la misma. La señorita Bygrave se niega simplemente a ser la manzana de la discordia (si me permite usted la alusión clásica) en su casa. Creo que por ahora tiene razón, y le confieso que he exagerado una indisposición nerviosa, que padece realmente, convirtiéndola en enfermedad grave, con el único propósito de impedir por el momento que las dos señoras se encuentren cada día en el paseo y que nos llevemos impresiones desagradables los unos de los otros a nuestras respectivas moradas.

- Yo no admito nada desagradable en mi morada -señaló Noel Vanstone-. Yo soy el que manda. Usted lo habrá notado sin duda, señor Bygrave. Yo soy el que manda.

- No me cabe la menor duda, mi querido señor. Pero vivir mañana, tarde y noche en el ejercicio perpetuo de su autoridad se parece más a la vida del gobernador de una prisión que a la del amo de una casa. El desgaste, piense en el desgaste.

- Es así como lo ve usted, ¿no es cierto? -dijo Noel Vanstone, aplacado por la prontitud con que el capitán había reconocido su autoridad-. No sé si tiene razón, pero he de tomar medidas inmediatamente. No toleraré que me pongan en ridículo. Despediré a Lecount antes que dejar que me pongan en ridículo. -Con el rostro encendido, cruzó sus pequeños brazos con gesto fiero. La explicación del capitán Wragge, hábilmente irritante, había despertado la sospecha latente de la influencia que ejercía sobre él su ama de llaves, que no se hallaba presente para devolverla con halagos al lugar donde solía permanecer, arrinconada y en reposo-. ¡Qué debe de pensar de mí la señorita Bygrave! -exclamó, manifestando súbitamente su disgusto-. Despediré a Lecount. ¡Maldición, despediré a Lecount en el acto!

- ¡No, no, no! -dijo el capitán, a quien no le interesaba que la señora Lecount se viera empujada a tomar medidas extremas y desesperadas-. ¿Por qué tomar medidas tan duras cuando bastaría con otras más suaves? La señora Lecount es una antigua sirvienta; la señora Lecount es útil y le tiene apego a usted. Presenta ese pequeño inconveniente de los celos, celos de su posición en la casa de su amo soltero. Ve que usted dedica sus atenciones a una joven y hermosa señorita; ve que esa señorita se muestra debidamente receptiva y, pobrecilla, ¡pierde los estribos! ¿Cuál es el remedio obvio? Complacerla, realizar una concesión masculina al sexo débil. Si la señora Lecount le acompaña la próxima vez que nos encontremos en el paseo, váyase por el otro lado. Si la señora Lecount no se halla con usted, concédanos el placer de su compañía, se lo ruego. En resumidas cuentas, mi querido señor, ¡pruebe el *suaviter in modo* (como decimos los estudiosos de los clásicos), antes de encomendarse al *fortiter in re*!

Noel Vanstone tenía una excelente razón para seguir el consejo conciliador del capitán Wragge. Una ruptura abierta con la señora Lecount -aun cuando hubiera podido armarse de valor para encararse con ella- hubiera supuesto el reconocimiento implícito del derecho de la señora Lecount a una suma de dinero en agradecimiento por los servicios prestados a su padre y a él. La sórdida naturaleza de Noel Vanstone temblaba en su interior ante la mera perspectiva de expresar en forma pecuniaria la emoción de la gratitud, así que, tras mirar por las apariencias fingiendo vacilación, consintió en

adoptar la sugerencia del capitán y complacer a la señora Lecount.

- Pero se ha de pensar en mí en este asunto -añadió Noel Vanstone-. Mi concesión a la debilidad de Lecount no debe ser interpretada de manera errónea. No debe permitirse que la señorita Bygrave suponga que tengo miedo de mi ama de llaves.

El capitán afirmó que tal idea no le había pasado ni podría pasarle jamás por la cabeza a la señorita Bygrave. No obstante, Noel Vanstone volvió al mismo tema una y otra vez con su acostumbrada pertinacia. ¿Sería una indiscreción si pidiera permiso para aclarárselo personalmente a la señorita Bygrave? ¿Existía alguna posibilidad de que pudiera tener la dicha de verla ese mismo día, o, si no, al día siguiente, o, si no, al otro? El capitán Wragge respondió con cautela comprendiendo la importancia de no despertar el recelo de Noel Vanstone con una excesiva celeridad en satisfacer sus deseos.

- Hoy una entrevista, mi querido señor, es imposible -dijo-. Todavía no se encuentra del todo bien; necesita reposo. Mañana me propongo sacarla a pasear antes de que empiece a hacer calor, no sólo para evitar situaciones embarazosas después de lo que ha pasado con la señora Lecount, sino también porque el aire y la tranquilidad matutinos son esenciales en estos casos nerviosos. Aquí somos gente madrugadora, saldremos a las siete. Si también usted madruga y desea acompañarnos, no necesito decirle que no tenemos objeción alguna que hacer a su compañía durante nuestro paseo matinal. Soy consciente de que la hora es un tanto insólita, pero más tarde quizá mi sobrina se eche en el sofá a descansar y no reciba visitas.

Tras efectuar esta propuesta con la simple intención de permitir a Noel Vanstone escaparse a North Shingles a una hora en que seguramente su ama de llaves aún estaría en la cama, el capitán Wragge esperó a que se diera por aludido, si era capaz de captar la indirecta. Noel Vanstone demostró la perspicacia suficiente (tratándose de un caso en el que estaban mezclados sus propios intereses) para aceptar la propuesta de inmediato. Manifestó cortésmente que siempre madrugaba cuando la mañana le ofrecía algún atractivo especial, aceptó la cita a las siete y se levantó al poco para despedirse.

- Unas palabras antes de separarnos -dijo el capitán Wragge-. Esta conversación ha de quedar entre nosotros. La señora Lecount no debe enterarse de la impresión que ha producido en mi sobrina. Se lo he comentado a usted únicamente para justificar mi conducta en apariencia grosera y para tranquilizarle a usted. En confianza, señor Vanstone, estrictamente en confianza. ¡Buenos días!

Tras estas palabras, el capitán despidió a su visitante con una inclinación de cabeza. A menos que ocurriera algún desastre inesperado, veía por fin el camino franco hacia el término de la empresa. Había avanzado dos importantes pasos esa mañana. Había sembrado la semilla de la discordia entre el ama de llaves y su amo, y había dado a Noel Vanstone un interés común con Magdalen y con él mismo ocultando un secreto a la señora Lecount. «Hemos cazado a nuestro hombre -pensó el capitán Wragge frotándose alegremente las manos-. ¡Por fin lo hemos cazado!»

Después de abandonar North Shingles, Noel Vanstone se encaminó directamente a su casa, habiendo recobrado el amor propio y con la firma resolución de llevar las riendas con mano dura si entraba en conflicto con la señora Lecount.

El ama de llaves recibió a su amo en la puerta con sus modales más suaves y su sonrisa más amable. Se dirigió a él con los ojos bajos, oponiendo una barrera de impenetrable respeto a la reivindicación de independencia que esperaba su amo.

- ¿Me permitiría preguntarle, señor -empezó el ama de llaves-, si su visita a North Shingles le ha llevado a extraer la misma conclusión que a mí con respecto a la enfermedad de la señorita Bygrave?

- Desde luego que no, Lecount. Considero que su conclusión fue precipitada, además de parcial.

- Lamento oírselo decir, señor. La grosera recepción del señor Bygrave me ha ofendido,

pero no era consciente de que mi juicio no fuera imparcial por esa causa. ¿Acaso le ha recibido a usted, señor, con una bienvenida más cordial?

- Me ha recibido como un caballero. No considero necesario decir nada más, Lecount; me ha recibido como un caballero.

Esta respuesta satisfizo a la señora Lecount en el único punto dudoso que la tenía perpleja. Fuera cual fuese el significado de la súbita frialdad del señor Bygrave hacia ella, el cortés recibimiento dispensado a su amo implicaba que el riesgo de ser descubierto no le había desalentado y que la conspiración seguía su curso. Los ojos del ama de llaves chispearon; era exactamente el resultado que había calculado. Tras un momento de reflexión, formuló a su amo una nueva pregunta:

- ¿Volverá usted a visitar al señor Bygrave, señor?

- Por supuesto que iré a visitarle, si me apetece.

- ¿Y quizá verá a la señorita Bygrave, si mejora?

- ¿Por qué no? Me gustaría saber por qué no. ¿Acaso es necesario pedirle permiso primero, Lecount?

- En absoluto, señor. Como usted dice a menudo (y yo he convenido a menudo con usted), usted manda. Puede que le sorprenda oír esto, señor Noel, pero tengo mis razones para desear que vuelva usted a ver a la señorita Bygrave.

El señor Noel se sorprendió un tanto y miró a su ama de llaves con cierta curiosidad.

- Tengo un extraño capricho relacionado con esa señorita, señor -prosiguió el ama de llaves-. Si me disculpa el capricho y me lo concede, me hará un favor por el que le estaré sumamente agradecida.

- ¿Un capricho? -repitió su amo con sorpresa creciente-. ¿Qué capricho?

- Sólo esto, señor -dijo la señora Lecount.

De uno de los pulcros bolsillos de su delantal sacó un trozo de papel de cartas doblado cuidadosamente hasta la mínima expresión y lo depositó respetuosamente en manos de Noel Vanstone.

- Si está usted dispuesto a complacer a una antigua y fiel sirvienta, señor Noel -dijo con expresión muy serena e impresionante-, tendrá usted la amabilidad de meterse este trozo de papel en el bolsillo del chaleco, de abrirlo y leerlo, por primera vez, en la próxima ocasión en que se encuentre en compañía de la señorita Bygrave, y de no decir nada de lo que hemos hablado a ningún ser viviente desde ahora hasta ese momento. Le prometo explicarle mi extraña petición, señor, cuando haya hecho usted lo que le pido y cuando su próxima entrevista con la señorita Bygrave haya concluido.

Hizo una reverencia con su mejor disposición y abandonó la estancia silenciosamente.

Noel Vanstone miró el papel y miró la puerta, y de nuevo miró el papel con indescriptible asombro. ¡Un misterio en su propia casa, en sus propias narices! ¿Qué significaba?

Significaba que la señora Lecount no había perdido el tiempo aquella mañana. Mientras el capitán arrojaba su red sobre su visitante en North Shingles, el ama de llaves se dedicaba a socavar tenazmente la tierra que él pisaba. El papel doblado no contenía otra cosa más que un extracto cuidadosamente escrito de la descripción personal de Magdalen en la carta de la señorita Garth. Con audaz ingenio que incluso el capitán Wragge hubiera envidiado, la señora Lecount había hallado el instrumento para desenmascarar la conspiración, ¡en la propia y confiada víctima!

CAPÍTULO VII

Aquella noche, cuando Magdalen y la señora Wragge volvieron de su paseo en la oscuridad, el capitán detuvo a Magdalen en su camino hacia el piso superior para informarle de su proceder durante el día. Manifestó además su opinión de que había llegado el momento de hacer que Noel Vanstone la propusiera en matrimonio con la menor demora posible. Ella se limitó a replicar que le había comprendido y que haría lo que se le pedía. El capitán le pidió, en ese caso, que le hiciera el favor de unirse a un paseo en compañía del señor Noel Vanstone a las siete de la mañana siguiente.

- Estaré preparada -replicó ella-. ¿Alguna cosa más? -No había nada más. Magdalen le deseó buenas noches y regresó a su dormitorio.

Magdalen había mostrado la misma aversión a permanecer en compañía del capitán más tiempo del necesario en los tres días que llevaba de reclusión en la casa.

Durante todo ese tiempo, en lugar de parecer cansada de la compañía de la señora Wragge, se había incorporado pacientemente, con avidez casi, a la absorbente ocupación de su compañera. Ella, que en otro tiempo se enojaba y se lamentaba por la monotonía de su vida en la libertad de Combe-Raven, aceptaba ahora sin un murmullo la monotonía de su vida junto a la mesa de trabajo de la señora Wragge. Ella, que en tiempos pretéritos detestaba la visión de la aguja y el hilo -que jamás había llevado una prenda confeccionada con sus propias manos-, se esforzaba ahora con tanta ansiedad en la confección del traje de la señora Wragge y soportaba tan pacientemente sus fallos como si el único objeto de su existencia fuera terminar con éxito esa única prenda. Recibía con agrado cualquier cosa -las dificultades triviales de la costura; la cháchara incesante de la pobrecilla medio boba que tan orgullosa estaba de su ayuda y tan feliz en su compañía-, cualquier cosa era bienvenida si la apartaba del futuro inmediato, del destino al que ella misma se había condenado. Aquella naturaleza gravemente herida hallaba consuelo ahora en una insignificancia como el apretón de la mano áspera y amistosa de su compañera; aquel corazón desolado se animaba, cuando las separaba la noche, con un beso de la señora Wragge.

La posición solitaria del capitán en la casa no produjo el menor efecto depresivo en su ánimo despreocupado y uniforme. En lugar de ofenderse por el modo sistemático en que Magdalen evitaba su compañía, observaba los resultados y lo aprobaba sin reservas. Cuanto más lo desdeñaba a él en favor de su mujer, más útil era en el papel de guardián directo de la señora Wragge que ella misma se había asignado. En más de una ocasión había considerado seriamente la posibilidad de revocar la concesión que le habían arrancado por la fuerza para enviar a su mujer, bajo su exclusiva responsabilidad, lejos de donde pudiera causar mal, y sólo había abandonado la idea al descubrir que la decisión de Magdalen de hacerse acompañar por la señora Wragge era realmente seria. Mientras las dos estuvieran juntas, el capitán podía olvidar su mayor preocupación. Las dos mujeres mantenían su puerta cerrada con llave por deseo suyo cuando él se ausentaba de la casa, e hiciera lo que hiciera la señora Wragge, podía confiar en que Magdalen no la abriría hasta que él volviera. Aquella noche, el capitán Wragge disfrutó de su cigarro con tranquilidad y se bebió su brandy con agua felizmente ignorante de la trampa que la señora Lecount le había tendido por la mañana.

Puntualmente a las siete hizo su aparición Noel Vanstone. En el momento mismo en que entró en la habitación, el capitán Wragge detectó un cambio en la expresión y las maneras de su visitante. «¡Algo malo -pensó-. Aún no nos hemos librado de la señora Lecount.»

- ¿Cómo está la señorita Bygrave esta mañana? -preguntó Noel Vanstone-. Lo bastante bien para nuestro paseo matinal, espero. -Sus ojos entrecerrados, débiles y lacrimosos a la luz y el aire matutinos, inspeccionaban la habitación furtivamente, y su dueño cambiaba de una silla a otra con nerviosismo mientras formulaba sus corteses preguntas.

- Mi sobrina está mejor; se está vistiendo para el paseo -respondió el capitán, observando atentamente a su inquieto amigo mientras hablaba-. ¡Señor Vanstone! -añadió de repente-. Soy un sencillo inglés, disculpe mi brusquedad al decirle las cosas tal como las pienso. No me trata usted esta mañana tan cordialmente como me trataba ayer. Trae usted el semblante agitado. ¡Desconfío de esa ama de llaves suya, señor! ¿Ha estado abusando de su indulgencia? ¿Ha intentado envenenar su ánimo contra mí o contra mi sobrina?

Si Noel Vanstone hubiera obedecido las órdenes de la señora Lecount y se hubiera guardado el pedacito de papel de cartas en el bolsillo hasta el momento de leerlo, tal vez las preguntas deliberadamente bruscas del capitán Wragge no le habrían pillado sin una respuesta preparada, pero la curiosidad había podido más que él, había abierto la nota por la noche y de nuevo por la mañana, y le había dejado sumido en la perplejidad y el asombro, además de haber perturbado sus pensamientos hasta el punto de privarle de sus recursos habituales. Vaciló; y su respuesta, cuando consiguió darla, empezó con una evasiva.

El capitán Wragge le interrumpió antes de que pronunciara una segunda frase.

- Perdóneme, señor -dijo el capitán con su tono más altanero-. Si tiene usted secretos que guardar, no tiene más que decirlo y no insistiré. Yo no me inmiscuyo en los secretos de ningún hombre. Sin embargo, señor Vanstone, permítame recordarle que yo le hablé ayer sin reservas por mi parte. Deposité en usted mi más sincera y total confianza, señor, y a pesar de lo mucho que valoro las virtudes de su compañía, no puedo consentir cultivar su amistad si no es en términos de igualdad. -Se abrió la respetable levita y examinó a su visitante con severidad varonil y virtuosa.

- ¡No pretendía ofenderle! -exclamó Noel Vanstone con tono patético-. ¿Por qué me interrumpe usted, señor Bygrave? ¿Por qué no deja que me explique? No pretendía ofenderle.

- No me ha ofendido, señor -dijo el capitán-. Tiene usted perfecto derecho a obrar como más le convenga. No estoy ofendido; sencillamente reclamo para mí el mismo privilegio que yo le otorgué a usted. -Se levantó con gran dignidad e hizo sonar la campanilla-. Dígale a la señorita Bygrave -ordenó a la criada- que nuestro paseo de esta mañana se aplaza hasta una nueva oportunidad y que no se moleste en bajar.

Esta drástica medida tuvo el efecto deseado. Noel Vanstone rogó encarecidamente que le concediera unos minutos de conversación en privado antes de que se transmitiera el mensaje. La severidad del capitán Wragge se mitigó en parte. Envió a la criada de nuevo a la cocina y, volviendo a sentarse, aguardó confiadamente los resultados. Para calcular la facilidad con que podría aprovecharse de la debilidad de su visitante, el capitán tenía una gran ventaja sobre la señora Lecount. Su juicio no estaba nublado por los latentes celos femeninos, y había evitado el error en que había caído el ama de llaves engañándose a sí misma, el error de subestimar la impresión que había producido Magdalen en Noel Vanstone. Una de las fuerzas de este mundo que ninguna mujer de mediana edad es capaz de valorar en su justa medida cuando actúa en su contra es la fuerza de la belleza en otra mujer más joven que ella.

- ¡Se precipita usted, señor Bygrave, no me da tiempo, no quiere esperar y escuchar lo que tengo que decir! -exclamó Noel Vanstone lastimosamente cuando la criada salió y cerró la puerta de la salita.

- Es el defecto de la familia, señor, la sangre de los Bygrave. Acepte mis disculpas. Estamos solos, tal como deseaba; continúe, se lo ruego.

Puesto en la disyuntiva de perder la compañía de Magdalen o traicionar a la señora Lecount, Noel Vanstone, que no sospechaba nada del auténtico propósito del ama de llaves y a quien acobardaba el imperturbable escrutinio de los inquisitivos ojos del capitán Wragge, no tardó mucho en tomar una decisión. Confusamente describió su singular conversación con la señora Lecount de la noche anterior y, sacando el papel doblado de su bolsillo, se lo entregó al capitán Wragge.

El capitán sospechó la verdad en cuanto vio la misteriosa nota. Se retiró a la ventana antes de abrirla. Las primeras líneas que atrajeron su atención fueron éstas: «Hágame el favor, señor Noel, de comparar a la señorita que se encuentra ahora en su compañía con la descripción personal que sigue a estas líneas y que me ha sido comunicada por un amigo. Sabrá usted el nombre de la persona descrita, que he dejado en blanco, tan pronto como la prueba de sus propios ojos le obligue a creer lo que se negaría a admitir como cierto si lo atestiguara sin pruebas Virginie Lecount».

Fue suficiente. Antes de que leyera una sola palabra de la descripción en sí, el capitán comprendió lo que había hecho la señora Lecount y sintió la profunda humillación de saber que su enemigo femenino le había pillado por sorpresa.

No había tiempo para pensar, la empresa se hallaba bajo la amenaza de ser desbaratada de forma irrevocable. El único recurso en la situación en que se hallaba el capitán Wragge consistía en dejarse llevar por el primer impulso de su propia audacia. Siguió leyendo la nota línea por línea; aun así, la pronta inventiva que jamás le había abandonado hasta entonces no supo responder a la llamada que se le hacía en aquellos instantes. Llegó a la frase final, a las últimas palabras que mencionaban los dos pequeños lunares en el cuello de Magdalen. En aquel punto culminante de la descripción, una idea cruzó por su cabeza, guiñó los ojos bicolores, sus labios sinuosos esbozaron una sonrisa; Wragge volvía a ser él mismo.

Dio media vuelta de repente y, de espaldas a la ventana, miró a Noel Vanstone a la cara con una expresión sombría que presagiaba algo serio.

- Disculpe, señor, ¿por casualidad sabe usted algo de la familia de la señora Lecount? -preguntó.

- Es una familia respetable -dijo Noel Vanstone-. No sé más. ¿Por qué lo pregunta?

- Yo no soy hombre de apuestas -prosiguió el capitán Wragge-. Pero en esta ocasión le apuesto lo que quiera a que hay locura en la familia de su ama de llaves.

- ¡Locura! -repitió Noel Vanstone con asombro.

- ¡Locura! -reiteró el capitán con gravedad, dando unos golpecitos en la nota con el dedo índice-. Veo la astucia, la suspicacia, la traición felina de la demencia en todas y cada una de las líneas de este deplorable documento. Hay una razón mucho más alarmante, señor, de lo que yo suponía para el comportamiento de la señora Lecount con mi sobrina. En mi opinión, es evidente que la señorita Bygrave se parece a alguna otra señora que ha ofendido gravemente a su ama de llaves, que estuvo relacionada quizá con uno de sus ataques de locura y que ahora confunde sin duda con mi sobrina en su desvarío. Estoy convencido de ello, señor Vanstone. Puede que esté en lo cierto o puede que no. Lo único que digo es que ni usted ni ningún otro hombre puede hallar un motivo común que lleve a la redacción de tan incomprensible documento y que exija el uso que le piden que haga de él.

- No creo que Lecount esté loca -dijo Noel Vanstone, atónito y muy turbado-. No se me habría escapado, con lo observador que soy yo; es imposible que no me diera cuenta, si Lecount estuviera loca.

- Perfectamente, mi querido señor. Yo opino que la señora Lecount es objeto de un engaño producto de la locura. Usted opina que está cuerda y que tiene algún enigmático motivo que ni usted ni yo alcanzamos a imaginar. En cualquier caso, no puede haber ningún mal en poner a prueba la descripción de la señora Lecount, no sólo por curiosidad, sino también para la entera satisfacción de ambas partes. Lógicamente es imposible contarle a mi sobrina que va a ser objeto de un experimento tan absurdo como el que sugiere la nota. Pero puede usted hacer uso de sus ojos, señor Vanstone, puede usted guardarse el secreto y, loca o no, puede por fin decirle a su ama de llaves que está equivocada con sus propios sentidos como testigos. Permítame volver a leer esa descripción. En su mayor parte no vale ni el papel en que está escrita a efectos de realizar una identificación; cientos de señoritas son altas, de piel blanca, cabellos de

color castaño claro y ojos gris claro. Por otro lado, me dirá usted que no hay cientos de señoritas con dos lunares juntos en el lado izquierdo del cuello. Muy cierto. Los lunares nos proporcionan lo que nosotros los hombres de ciencia llamamos una prueba decisiva. Cuando baje mi sobrina, señor, tiene usted mi permiso para tomarse la libertad de mirarle el cuello.

Noel Vanstone expresó su ferviente aprobación de la prueba decisiva, sonriendo bobaliconamente por primera vez aquella mañana.

- De mirarle el cuello -repitió el capitán, devolviendo la nota a su visitante y dirigiéndose luego hacia la puerta-. Yo mismo iré arriba, señor Vanstone -continuó-, y examinaré el atuendo de paseo de la señorita Bygrave. Si inocentemente ha colocado algún obstáculo en su camino, si su peinado es demasiado bajo, o su pechera demasiado alta, ejerceré mi autoridad con el primer pretexto inocuo que se me ocurra para eliminar esos obstáculos. Todo lo que pido es que elija usted su oportunidad discretamente y no permita a mi sobrina suponer que su cuello es objeto de la inspección de un caballero.

El capitán Wragge no perdió un momento, en cuanto abandonó la salita, en subir las escaleras a toda velocidad y llamar a la puerta de Magdalen.

Ella le abrió con su traje de paseo, obedeciendo a la señal que habían acordado para indicarle que bajara.

- ¿Qué ha hecho con las pinturas y los polvos? -preguntó el capitán, sin malgastar saliva en preámbulos-. No estaban en el baúl de disfraces que vendí en Birmingham. ¿Dónde están?

- Los tengo aquí -respondió Magdalen-. ¿A qué viene ahora ese interés por ellos?

- Tráigalos inmediatamente a mi vestidor; todo, pinceles, paleta y todo lo demás. No pierda tiempo haciendo preguntas; le explicaré lo que pasa mientras actuamos. Cada minuto es precioso. ¡Sígame inmediatamente!

Su rostro delataba claramente que tenía una seria razón para su extraña propuesta. Magdalen fue en busca de su colección de cosméticos y siguió al capitán a su vestidor. Él cerró la puerta, la sentó en una silla cerca de la luz y luego le contó lo que había ocurrido.

- Estamos a punto de ser descubiertos -dijo el capitán mientras mezclaba los colores cuidadosamente con cola líquida y con un fuerte «secante» que agregó de una botella que obraba en su poder-. Sólo nos queda una posibilidad (levántese el pelo del lado izquierdo del cuello); le he dicho al señor Noel Vanstone que aproveche la ocasión de mirarla cuando se le presente, y voy a dar el mentís a esa diablesa de Lecount pintándole los lunares.

- No se pueden pintar -dijo Magdalen-. No hay color que los tape.

- Mi color sí -señaló el capitán Wragge-. En mi época probé diversas profesiones, entre ellas la de pintor. ¿Ha oído hablar alguna vez de una cosa llamada ojo a la funerala? En otro tiempo viví unos cuantos meses en la vecindad de Drury Lane, gracias exclusivamente a los ojos a la funerala. Mi color carne tapaba contusiones de todos los tipos, tamaños y tonos, y le tapará a usted los lunares, se lo prometo.

Con estas seguras palabras, el capitán hundió el pincel en una pequeña masa de color opaco que había mezclado en un platillo hasta obtener, dentro de lo que le permitían los materiales a su disposición, el color de la piel de Magdalen. Tras pasar primero un pañuelo de batista con unos pocos polvos blancos sobre la parte del cuello en la que pensaba trabajar, dio dos capas de color sobre los lunares con la punta del pincel. El proceso se llevó a cabo en unos instantes y los lunares desaparecieron de la vista como por ensalmo. Únicamente un examen muy detenido podría haber puesto al descubierto el artificio con que estaban disimulados; a la distancia de apenas un metro era totalmente invisible.

- Espere aquí cinco minutos -dijo el capitán Wragge- para que se seque la pintura y luego baje a la salita. La propia señora Lecount se quedaría con un palmo de narices si la viera ahora.

- ¡Deténgase! -dijo Magdalen-. Hay una cosa que aún no me ha dicho. ¿Cómo consiguió la señora Lecount la descripción que ha leído usted abajo? Puede que haya visto otras cosas, pero no los lunares del cuello; están demasiado altos y demasiado atrás; los tapan los cabellos.

- ¿Quién conoce esas marcas? -preguntó el capitán Wragge.

Magdalen se tornó lívida de angustia ante el súbito recuerdo de Frank.

- Mi hermana -respondió débilmente.

- Puede que la señora Lecount le haya escrito -sugirió el capitán.

- ¿Cree que mi hermana le contaría a una persona desconocida lo que ningún desconocido tiene derecho a saber? ¡Jamás! ¡Jamás!

- ¿No hay nadie más que pueda habérselo dicho a la señora Lecount? Las marcas se mencionaban en los carteles de York. ¿Quién las puso ahí?

- ¡Norah no! Quizá el señor Pendril. Quizá la señorita Garth.

- Entonces la señora Lecount ha escrito al señor Pendril o a la señorita Garth; a esta última con toda probabilidad. Le habrá sido más fácil tratar con la institutriz que con el abogado.

- ¿Qué puede haberle contado a la señorita Garth?

El capitán Wragge meditó un momento.

- No sé lo que puede haber escrito la señora Lecount -dijo-, pero puedo decirle lo que hubiera escrito yo en su lugar. Yo hubiera asustado a la señorita Garth con informaciones falsas sobre usted, para empezar, y luego hubiera pedido detalles personales para ayudar a una benevolente desconocida a devolverla a usted a sus allegados.

Al instante los ojos de Magdalen lanzaron chispas de cólera.

- Lo que usted hubiera hecho es lo que ha hecho la señora Lecount -dijo Magdalen, indignada-. Ni abogado ni institutriz me disputarán el derecho a hacer mi voluntad y a hacerla a mi manera. Si la señorita Garth cree que podrá controlar mis acciones manteniendo correspondencia con la señora Lecount, ¡le demostraré a la señorita Garth que está equivocada! Ya es hora, capitán Wragge, de terminar con estos lamentables riesgos de ser descubiertos. Tomaremos el camino más corto hacia nuestros fines antes de lo que creen la señora Lecount y la señorita Garth. ¿Cuánto tiempo puede concederme para arrancar una propuesta de matrimonio de esa criatura que hay abajo?

- No me atrevo a darle mucho -respondió el capitán Wragge-. Ahora que sus allegados saben dónde está, podrían caer sobre nosotros cualquier día. ¿Podría conseguirlo en una semana?

- Lo conseguiré en la mitad de tiempo -dijo ella, con una carcajada áspera y desafiante-. Déjenos solos esta mañana como nos dejó en Dunwich y lleve a la señora Wragge consigo como excusa para separarnos. ¿Se ha secado la pintura? Vaya abajo y dígale que iré en seguida.

Así fue como, por segunda vez, los esfuerzos bienintencionados de la señorita Garth desbarataron sus propios fines. Así fue como la fuerza fatal de las circunstancias convirtió la mano que con gusto hubiera hecho regresar a Magdalen en la mano que la impulsó a seguir hacia delante.

El capitán se reunió con el visitante en la salita, tras detenerse por el camino para dar a la señora Wragge las órdenes pertinentes sobre el paseo.

- Estoy abrumado por haberle hecho esperar -dijo, sentándose de nuevo confidencialmente junto a Noel Vanstone-. Mi única excusa es que mi sobrina se había peinado casualmente de un modo que frustraba nuestro objetivo. He tenido que convencerla para que lo cambiara, y las jóvenes son propensas a mostrarse un tanto obstinadas en todo lo relacionado con su arreglo personal. Ofrézcale una silla de ese lado cuando entre y mírele cómodamente el cuello antes de que iniciemos nuestro paseo.

Magdalen entró en la habitación cuando decía estas palabras. Después de intercambiar los primeros saludos, se sentó en la silla que le ofrecían con una buena disposición libre de suspicacias. Noel Vanstone aplicó la prueba decisiva al instante, apreciando en lo que valía el bello material que era objeto de su experimento. Ni el menor vestigio de lunar era visible en parte alguna de la lisa y blanca superficie del cuello de la señorita Bygrave. Tal fue la muda respuesta al examen de los ojos entrecerrados de Noel Vanstone que la miraban pestañeando, y así quedó rotundamente contradicha en la práctica la señora Lecount. Ese incidente central en los acontecimientos de la mañana fue, de todos los que hasta entonces habían ocurrido, el más importante por sus resultados. Aquel descubrimiento hizo tambalearse el ascendiente que el ama de llaves tenía sobre su amo como ninguna otra cosa lo había conseguido hasta entonces.

Al cabo de unos minutos apareció la señora Wragge y causó toda la sorpresa que Noel Vanstone era capaz de sentir mientras estaba absorto en el deleite de la compañía de Magdalen. El grupo abandonó la casa de inmediato y dirigió sus pasos hacia el norte para no pasar por delante de las ventanas de Sea-View Cottage. Con indescriptible asombro, vio la señora Wragge cómo su marido, por primera vez en el transcurso de su vida conyugal, le ofrecía el brazo cortésmente y se adelantaba con ella a la joven pareja, ¡como si el privilegio de caminar a solas con ella resultara especialmente atractivo para él!

- ¡Apriete el paso! -susurró el capitán con fiereza-. ¡Deje a su sobrina y al señor Vanstone a solas! ¡Si la pillo mirando hacia atrás, echaré el traje de cachemira oriental al fuego de la cocina! Vuelva los pies hacia fuera y lleve el paso; ¡maldita sea, lleve el paso! -La señora Wragge llevó el paso dentro de lo que le permitía su limitada capacidad. Sus robustas rodillas temblaban. Creía firmemente que el capitán estaba ebrio.

El paseo duró más de una hora. Antes de las nueve se hallaban de vuelta en North Shingles. Las señoras entraron rápidamente en la casa. Noel Vanstone se quedó con el capitán Wragge en el jardín.

- Bueno -dijo el capitán-. ¿Qué piensa usted ahora de la señora Lecount?

- ¡Maldita Lecount! -replicó Noel Vanstone, presa de una gran agitación-. Casi estoy inclinado a coincidir con usted. Casi estoy inclinado a pensar que mi infernal ama de llaves está loca.

Hablaba con tono quejumbroso y de mala gana, como si la mera alusión a la señora Lecount le resultara desagradable. De su rostro huía y volvía el color, sus modales eran distraídos e irresolutos, se movía con nerviosismo de un lado a otro por el sendero del jardín. Hasta para un observador menos agudo que el capitán Wragge habría sido evidente que Magdalen había recibido las insinuaciones amorosas de Noel Vanstone con un inesperado favor y una voluntad de alentarlas que le habían hecho perder por completo el dominio de sí mismo.

- ¡Jamás había disfrutado tanto de un paseo en toda mi vida! -exclamó en un súbito arrebato de entusiasmo-. Espero que a la señorita Bygrave le haya sentado bien. ¿Saldrán a la misma hora mañana por la mañana? ¿Podría volver a acompañarlos?

- Por supuesto, señor Vanstone -dijo el capitán cordialmente-. Discúlpeme por volver a

tocar ese tema, pero ¿qué se propone usted decirle a la señora Lecount?

- No lo sé. ¡Lecount es una auténtica molestia! ¿Qué haría usted, señor Bygrave, si estuviera en mi lugar?

- Permítame que le haga una pregunta, mi querido señor, antes de contestarle. ¿A qué hora suele desayunar usted?

- A las nueve y media.

- ¿Se levanta pronto la señora Lecount?

- No. Lecount es perezosa por la mañana. ¡Detesto a las mujeres perezosas! Si estuviera usted en mi lugar, ¿qué le diría?

- No le diría nada -respondió el capitán Wragge-. Volvería de inmediato por la parte de atrás, dejaría que la señora Lecount me viera en el jardín como si estuviera dando una vuelta antes de desayunar y dejaría que supusiera que acababa de salir de mi habitación. Si le pregunta si piensa venir hoy aquí, diga que no. Asegúrese una vida tranquila hasta que las circunstancias le obliguen a dar una respuesta. Entonces dígale simplemente la verdad. Dígale que la sobrina del señor Bygrave y la descripción de la señora Lecount discrepan en el detalle más importante, y niéguele que no vuelva a mencionar el asunto. Ahí tiene mi consejo. ¿Qué opina de él?

Si Noel Vanstone hubiera podido echar un vistazo a los pensamientos de su consejero, tal vez habría considerado que el consejo del capitán se adaptaba de modo perfecto a sus propios intereses. Mientras pudiera mantenerse a la señora Lecount en la ignorancia con respecto a las visitas de su amo a North Shingles, ella seguiría aguardando la oportunidad para probar su experimento, por lo que podía confiar en que no pondría en peligro la conspiración con alguna otra medida. Necesariamente incapaz de considerar el consejo del capitán Wragge desde ese punto de vista, Noel Vanstone se limitó a ver que le ofrecía un medio temporal de eludir una explicación a su ama de llaves. Declaró, pues, con vehemencia que cumpliría al pie de la letra el plan sugerido por el capitán Wragge y regresó a Sea-View Cottage sin más demora.

En esta ocasión, las previsiones del capitán Wragge no fueron refutadas en modo alguno por la conducta de la señora Lecount. El ama de llaves no sospechaba lo más mínimo la visita de su amo a North Shingles. Había decidido, si era necesario, esperar pacientemente hasta el final de la semana a que se entrevistara con la señorita Bygrave, así que no le turbó con preguntas inesperadas cuando él anunció su intención de no tener comunicación personal con los Bygrave ese día. Lo único que ella dijo fue:

- ¿No se encuentra usted bien, señor Noel, o no le apetece?

- No me encuentro bien -respondió él brevemente, y allí terminó la conversación.

Al día siguiente se repitieron exactamente las acciones de la mañana anterior. Esta vez, Noel Vanstone volvió a casa extasiado con un recuerdo en el bolsillo del pecho; se había apoderado tiernamente de uno de los guantes de la señorita Bygrave. A ratos, durante el día, siempre que estaba solo, sacaba el guante y lo besaba con una devoción que era casi apasionada en su fervor. La pequeña y miserable criatura disfrutaba de sus momentos de felicidad robada con un deleite mudo y cauteloso que constituía una nueva sensación para él. Las pocas jóvenes que había conocido en el estrecho círculo de su padre en Zurich habían sentido un placer perverso en tratarle como un extraño juguete; la impresión más fuerte que pudo hacer él en sus corazones sólo podría haber rivalizado con la que les producían sus perritos falderos; el mayor interés que pudo crear en ellas fue el que podrían haber tenido por un nuevo dije o un nuevo vestido. Las únicas mujeres que habían suscitado hasta entonces su admiración y que se habían tomado sus cumplidos en serio eran mujeres cuyos encantos empezaban a menguar y cuyas posibilidades de casarse disminuían rápidamente. Por primera vez en su vida había pasado horas de felicidad en compañía de una hermosa muchacha en la que podía pensar después sin un solo recuerdo humillante que dejara malparado su amor propio.

Pese al ansia con que intentó disimularlo, el cambio operado en su aspecto y sus modales por el nuevo sentimiento que había despertado en él no podía ocultarse a los ojos de la señora Lecount. El segundo día, el ama de llaves le preguntó intencionadamente si no había concertado una cita para visitar a los Bygrave. Él lo negó, como el día anterior.

- ¿Quizá vaya mañana, señor Noel? -insistió el ama de llaves. Noel Vanstone se quedó sin recursos; estaba impaciente por librarse del interrogatorio; confiaba en que su amigo de North Shingles le ayudara, y esta vez respondió que sí-. Si ve usted a la señorita -prosiguió la señora Lecount-, no olvide aquella nota mía, señor, que lleva en el bolsillo del chaleco. -No se dijo más por ninguna de las dos partes, pero el ama de llaves envió una carta a la señorita Garth con el correo de la tarde. La carta se limitaba a acusar recibo de la que ésta le había enviado, a darle las gracias y a informarle de que la señora Lecount esperaba estar en posición de volver a escribirle al cabo de unos días para solicitar la presencia del señor Pendril en Aldborough.

Esa noche, cuando la salita de North Shingles empezaba a sumirse en la oscuridad y el capitán hacía sonar la campanilla para que le llevaran las bujías, como de costumbre, éste se sorprendió al oír la voz de Magdalen en el pasillo diciéndole a la criada que volviera a llevarse las bujías a la cocina. Magdalen llamó a la puerta inmediatamente después y se adentró en la oscuridad de la habitación como un fantasma.

- Quiero hacerle una pregunta sobre sus planes para mañana -dijo-. Tengo los ojos cansados esta noche y espero que no le importe prescindir de las bujías durante unos minutos.

Magdalen hablaba en voz baja, dirigiéndose sin hacer ruido a una silla muy alejada del capitán en la parte más oscura de la habitación. Sentándose cerca de la ventana, el capitán podía distinguir el perfil borroso de su vestido y oír apenas el tono apagado de su voz. En los últimos dos días sólo la había visto durante los paseos matinales. Por la tarde había encontrado a su mujer llorando en la planta baja, en la pequeña habitación del fondo. La señora Wragge sólo pudo decirle que Magdalen la había asustado, que volvía a recorrer el mismo camino que recorriera cuando le llegó la carta de la China en los terribles días de Vauxhall Walk.

- Lamento que haya estado indispuesta hoy, según me ha dicho la señora Wragge -dijo el capitán casi en un susurro, bajando la voz sin darse cuenta.

- No importa -respondió Magdalen en voz baja desde la oscuridad-. Soy lo bastante fuerte para sufrir y seguir viviendo. Otras jóvenes en mi lugar hubieran sido más felices, hubieran sufrido hasta morir. Da igual; dentro de cien años no tendrá la menor importancia. ¿Volverá mañana por la mañana a las siete?

- Volverá, si no tiene nada que objetar.

- En absoluto. Por mi parte se han acabado las objeciones. Pero me gustaría cambiar la hora. No tengo muy buen aspecto tan temprano. Paso malas noches y me levanto ojerosa y demacrada. Escríbale una nota esta noche y dígale que venga a las doce.

- Las doce es una hora un poco tardía para que la vean paseando, dadas las circunstancias.

- No tengo intención de pasear. Que le hagan pasar a la salita...

Su voz se extinguió antes de que acabara la frase.

- ¿Sí? -dijo el capitán Wragge.

- Y déjeme que lo reciba yo a solas.

- Comprendo -dijo el capitán-. Una idea admirable. Yo me quedaré en el comedor

mientras esté aquí, y usted puede venir a contarme lo sucedido cuando él se vaya.

Se hizo nuevamente el silencio.

- ¿Es indispensable que se lo cuente de palabra? -preguntó Magdalen de repente-. Puedo dominarme mientras él está conmigo, pero no respondo de lo que pueda decir o hacer después. ¿No hay otro modo?

- Muchos -contestó el capitán-. Aquí está el primero que se me ocurre. Deje bajada la persiana de su dormitorio antes de que él llegue. Yo me iré a la playa y esperaré allí a la vista de la casa. Cuando vea que él sale, miraré la ventana. Si no le ha dicho nada, deje la persiana tal como está. Si se ha declarado, súbala. La señal es la simplicidad misma; no hay error posible. ¡Utilice todos sus encantos mañana! Amárrelo bien, mi querida niña, amárrelo bien mientras pueda.

El capitán había hablado con un tono lo bastante alto como para tener la certeza de que ella le había oído, pero Magdalen no respondió. El absoluto silencio sólo se vio perturbado por el frufrú de su vestido, lo que indicó al capitán que Magdalen se había levantado de su silla. Su vaga presencia volvió a atravesar la habitación. La puerta se cerró con suavidad. Magdalen se había ido. El capitán hizo sonar la campanilla rápidamente para pedir luz. La criada lo encontró de pie cerca de la ventana; parecía menos dueño de sí mismo que de costumbre. Dijo que se hallaba levemente indispuesto y la envió al aparador para que le sirviera un brandy.

Unos minutos antes de las doce del día siguiente, el capitán Wragge se retiró a su puesto de observación, ocultándose tras una barca de pesca varada en la playa. Cuando dieron las doce, vio a Noel Vanstone acercarse a North Shingles puntualmente y abrir la verja del jardín. Después de que entrara en la casa y se cerrara la puerta, el capitán Wragge se recostó cómodamente en un costado de la barca y encendió un cigarro.

Fumó durante media hora, diez minutos por encima de la media según su reloj. Apuró el cigarro hasta el último resto que pudo sostener entre los labios. Justamente cuando acababa de lanzar la colilla, volvió a abrirse la puerta y por ella salió Noel Vanstone.

Inmediatamente el capitán alzó la vista hacia la ventana de Magdalen. La absorbente excitación del momento le hizo contar los segundos. Magdalen podía llegar a su habitación desde la salita en menos de un minuto. Él contó hasta treinta y no ocurrió nada. Contó hasta cincuenta, y no ocurrió nada. Dejó de contar y se alejó de la barca con impaciencia para regresar a la casa.

Cuando dio su primer paso vio la señal. La persiana había sido levantada.

Subiendo cautelosamente por la pendiente de la playa, el capitán Wragge miró hacia Sea-View Cottage antes de dejarse ver en el paseo. Noel Vanstone había llegado a su casa y entraba entonces por la puerta.

- Si me ofrecieran todo su dinero por ponerme en su pellejo -dijo el capitán sin dejar de mirarlo-, con todo lo rico que es, ¡no lo aceptaría!

CAPÍTULO VIII

A su regreso a North Shingles, el capitán recibió un significativo mensaje de la criada: «El señor Noel Vanstone volvería a las dos de la tarde y esperaba tener el placer de hallar en casa al señor Bygrave».

La primera pregunta del capitán, tras oír el mensaje, se refirió a Magdalen. ¿Dónde estaba la señorita Bygrave? En su habitación. ¿Dónde estaba la señora Bygrave? En la salita del fondo. Inmediatamente el capitán dirigió sus pasos en esa última dirección y halló a su esposa, por segunda vez, hecha un mar de lágrimas. Magdalen la había echado de su habitación para el resto del día y su pobre cabeza no acertaba a comprender qué había hecho para merecerlo. El capitán interrumpió las lamentaciones de su mujer sin ceremonia y la envió arriba con instrucciones de llamar a la puerta y preguntar a Magdalen si podía conceder cinco minutos de atención a un importante asunto que debía ser resuelto antes de las dos.

La respuesta fue negativa. Magdalen pedía que le comunicara por escrito el asunto sobre el que se requería su decisión. Se comprometía a responder del mismo modo, con la condición de que la señora Wragge entregara la nota en lugar de la criada y recogiera la respuesta.

El capitán Wragge abrió inmediatamente su estuche de papel de cartas y escribió las siguientes líneas: «Acepte mi más cordial enhorabuena por el resultado de su entrevista con el señor N. V. Volverá a las dos, sin duda, para pedir su mano formalmente. La cuestión que hay que decidir es si debo presionarle o no en la cuestión de las capitulaciones. Dos son las consideraciones que ha de tener presentes. En primer lugar, si dicha presión (sin subestimar en lo más mínimo la influencia de usted sobre él) no debe prolongarse antes de que consiga sacarle dinero al señor N. V. En segundo lugar, si tenemos razones de peso (teniendo en cuenta nuestra posición actual con respecto a cierta intrigante con enaguas) para correr el riesgo de demorarnos. Medite estos puntos y hágame saber su decisión lo antes posible».

La respuesta a esta nota llegó escrita con caracteres torcidos y emborronados, extrañamente distintos de la letra firme y clara que era habitual en Magdalen. Sólo contenía estas palabras: «No es necesario que se moleste con capitulaciones. Deje en mis manos el uso que dará Noel Vanstone a su dinero en el futuro».

- ¿La ha visto? -preguntó el capitán a su mujer cuando le entregó el mensaje.

- Lo he intentado -dijo la señora Wragge echándose de nuevo a llorar-, pero sólo ha abierto la puerta lo suficiente para sacar la mano. Se la he cogido y la he apretado un poco y, oh, pobrecilla, ¡qué fría estaba!

Cuando el amo de la señora Lecount hizo su aparición a las dos en punto, se hallaba alarmantemente necesitado de una benéfica aplicación del abanico verde de la señora Lecount. La agitación de haberse declarado a Magdalen, el terror de ser descubierto por el ama de llaves, la atormentadora sospecha de las duras condiciones pecuniarias que pudiera imponerle el pariente y tutor de Magdalen: todas estas emociones entremezcladas y en lucha unas con otras habían sobrecargado su débil corazón sometiéndolo a una prueba que difícilmente podía soportar. Resollaba cuando se sentó en la salita de North Shingles y volvió a aparecer aquella ominosa palidez azulada que le servía de advertencia y que se extendía por su rostro en momentos de gran turbación. Sinceramente alarmado, el capitán Wragge cogió la botella de brandy y obligó a su visitante a beberse un vaso de vino lleno de licor antes de que intercambiaran una sola palabra.

Reanimado por el estimulante y alentado por la buena disposición con que el capitán se anticipaba a cuanto tenía que decir, Noel Vanstone consiguió manifestar el serio objeto de su visita con una tolerable claridad. Fácilmente prescindieron de los preliminares convencionales, adecuados para la ocasión. La familia del pretendiente era respetable,

su posición social era innegablemente satisfactoria, su afecto, aunque reciente, era sin duda desinteresado y sincero. El capitán Wragge sólo tenía que referirse a estas consideraciones diversas con una feliz elección del lenguaje y la voz temblorosa de varonil emoción, y lo hizo a la perfección. Durante la primera media hora no se hizo alusión alguna a la parte más delicada y espinosa del asunto. El capitán esperó hasta que consiguió tranquilizar a su visitante y, cuando alcanzó ese resultado, lo sacó a colación con tacto y en estos términos:

- Sólo existe una dificultad, señor Vanstone, que creo que ambos hemos pasado por alto. La reciente conducta de su ama de llaves me induce a temer que no verá con buenos ojos el inminente cambio que se producirá en su vida. Seguramente no habrá considerado usted necesario informarle aún del nuevo vínculo que se propone establecer. ¿Me equivoco?

Noel Vanstone palideció ante la mera idea de dar explicaciones a la señora Lecount.

- No sé qué voy a hacer -dijo mirando hacia la ventana de reojo y con nerviosismo, como si esperara ver al ama de llaves asomándose a ella-. Detesto las situaciones embarazosas y ésta es la más desagradable en la que me he encontrado jamás. No sabe usted lo terrible que es Lecount. Yo no la temo, por favor, no crea usted que yo la temo...

Al pronunciar estas palabras, el miedo le hizo un nudo en la garganta y las desmintió rotundamente haciéndole enmudecer.

- Por favor, no se moleste en darme explicaciones -dijo el capitán Wragge acudiendo al rescate-. Es una historia de lo más corriente, señor Vanstone. Aquí tenemos a una mujer que ha envejecido a su servicio y al servicio de su padre antes que usted; una mujer que, con toda suerte de pequeñas triquiñuelas, ha conseguido aprovecharse sistemáticamente de su posición durante años y años; una mujer, en definitiva, a la que usted, con su bondad irreflexiva, pero absolutamente natural, ha permitido que reclamara un derecho de propiedad...

- ¡Propiedad! -exclamó Noel Vanstone, interpretando erróneamente al capitán y dejando que la verdad escapara de sus labios por la mera incapacidad de ocultar sus temores más tiempo-. Qué sé yo qué cantidad de propiedad reclamará. Me hará pagar por mi padre además de mí. ¡¡¡Miles, señor Bygrave, miles de libras esterlinas de mi bolsillo!!! -Juntó las manos con desesperación ante la imagen de una coacción pecuniaria evocada por su fantasía; ¡su dorado fluido vital brotando a chorros de prodigalidad bajo la lanceta de la señora Lecount!

- Calma, señor Vanstone, ¡calma! La mujer no sabe nada por ahora y el dinero aún no se ha esfumado.

- No, no, el dinero no se ha esfumado, como dice usted. Es sólo que me pone nervioso pensarlo. No puedo evitarlo. Me estaba diciendo algo hace un momento, iba usted a aconsejarme. Valoro sus consejos; no sabe usted hasta qué punto los valoro. -Dijo estas palabras con una sonrisa conciliadora, que era algo más que impotente: era absolutamente servil en su dependencia del juicioso amigo.

- Me limitaba a asegurarle, mi querido señor, que comprendía su posición perfectamente -dijo el capitán-. Comprendo sus dificultades tan bien como usted mismo. Dígale a una mujer como la señora Lecount que debe abandonar su trono doméstico para dejar sitio a una sucesora joven y bella armada con la autoridad de una esposa, y el resultado inevitable será una desagradable escena. Una desagradable escena, señor Vanstone, si su opinión sobre la cordura de su ama de llaves está fundamentada. Algo mucho más serio, si mi opinión de que su mente está trastornada resulta ser cierta.

- No digo que no sea también mi opinión -replicó Noel Vanstone-. Sobre todo después de lo que ha pasado hoy.

Inmediatamente el capitán Wragge quiso saber cuál era el suceso al que aludía.

Noel Vanstone, por consiguiente, explicó -con un infinito número de paréntesis, todos referidos a él- que la señora Lecount había formulado la temida pregunta con respecto a la pequeña nota del bolsillo de su amo hacía apenas una hora. Él había respondido siguiendo el consejo del señor Bygrave. Al oír que se había puesto a prueba la exactitud de la descripción personal y había fracasado en el importantísimo detalle de los lunares del cuello, la señora Lecount había reflexionado unos instantes y luego había preguntado si le había mostrado la nota al señor Bygrave antes de probar el experimento. El señor Vanstone había respondido negativamente como única forma de respuesta segura que le vino a la cabeza y el ama de llaves le había dirigido entonces estas extrañas y sobrecogedoras palabras: «No me dice usted la verdad, señor Noel. Confía usted en desconocidos y duda de su vieja amiga y sirvienta. Cada vez que entra usted en la casa del señor Bygrave, cada vez que ve a la señorita Bygrave, se acerca más y más a su propia destrucción. Le han puesto una venda en los ojos pese a mis esfuerzos, pero les digo a ellos igual que a usted, que antes de que pasen muchos días, ¡habré de quitársela!». A este extraordinario arrebato -acompañado al parecer por una expresión que él no había visto antes en el rostro de la señora Lecount- Noel Vanstone no replicó. Había recordado la convicción del señor Bygrave de que la tara de la demencia estaba latente en la sangre del ama de llaves y había abandonado la habitación a la primera oportunidad.

El capitán Wragge escuchó con la mayor atención esta exposición de los hechos. No podía sacar de ella más que una conclusión: una clara advertencia de que debía apresurar el final.

- No me sorprende -dijo con gravedad- oírle decir que empieza a inclinarse en favor de mi opinión. Después de lo que acaba de contarme, señor Vanstone, ningún hombre razonable podría pensar otra cosa. Esto empieza a ser serio. No me atrevo a pensar en las consecuencias cuando le comunique usted a la señora Lecount su próximo cambio de vida. Mi sobrina podría sufrirlas. Es nerviosa, es sumamente sensible, es el objeto inocente del odio y el recelo irracionales de esa mujer. ¡Me alarma usted, señor! No soy hombre que se deje intimidar fácilmente, pero admito que lo que me cuenta me hace temer por el futuro. -Frunció el entrecejo, meneó la cabeza y miró a su visitante con aire pesimista.

Noel Vanstone empezó a inquietarse. El cambio de actitud del señor Bygrave parecía presagiar que reconsideraría su propuesta de matrimonio desde un nuevo punto de vista desfavorable. Consultó con su cobardía y su astucia innatas y sugirió una solución para aquella dificultad, que descubrió él mismo.

- ¿Por qué habríamos de decírselo a Lecount? -preguntó-. ¿Qué derecho tiene ella a saberlo? ¿No podemos casarnos sin hacerla partícipe del secreto? ¿Y no puede alguien decírselo después, cuando estemos ambos fuera de su alcance?

El capitán Wragge acogió esta propuesta con una expresión de sorpresa que decía mucho de su capacidad para dominar su propio semblante. Su objetivo principal durante toda la entrevista había sido conducirla hasta aquel punto o, en otras palabras, hacer que la idea de mantener en secreto el matrimonio ante la señora Lecount surgiera de Noel Vanstone y no de él. Nadie mejor que el capitán sabía que las únicas responsabilidades que acepta un hombre débil son aquellas que se le podrán atribuir siempre como exclusivamente suyas.

- Acostumbro oponerme firmemente a todo tipo de procedimientos clandestinos -dijo el capitán Wragge-, pero hay excepciones a las reglas más estrictas, y estoy obligado a admitir, señor Vanstone, que si alguna vez ha habido una situación excepcional, ésa es la suya. La línea de acción que usted propone, por impropia que me parezca, por desagradable que me resulte, no sólo le evitaría a usted una situación muy enojosa (por no decir otra cosa), sino que también le protegería de la reivindicación personal de esos derechos pecuniarios por parte de su ama de llaves a los que antes se ha referido. Ambos resultados son deseables, por no hablar de que disiparía todos mis temores de que mi sobrina pueda ser molestada. Por otro lado, empero, la celebración de un matrimonio en la intimidad, como usted propone, ha de ser precipitada, pues, dada nuestra posición, cuanto más se retrase, más grande será el riesgo de que nuestro

secreto deje de serlo. No estoy en contra de los matrimonios rápidos cuando la llama mutua del amor se aviva con una renta adecuada. Yo mismo contraje matrimonio por amor y a toda prisa. Todos conocemos numerosos ejemplos de noviazgos cortos y matrimonios rápidos que han resultado ser caballos ganadores, perdón, que han resultado bien al fin y al cabo. Así pues, si usted y mi sobrina, señor Vanstone, quieren añadir uno más a la suma de estos casos, habremos de acelerar de algún modo los preliminares habituales de los matrimonios entre las clases altas. Sin duda ha comprendido usted que me refiero al tema de las capitulaciones.

- Me tomaré otro dedito de brandy -dijo Noel Vanstone, alzando el vaso con mano temblorosa cuando el capitán Wragge pronunció la palabra «capitulaciones».

- Le acompaño -dijo el capitán, bajándose ágilmente del pedestal de su respetabilidad para beberse el brandy con el mayor deleite. Tras seguir el ejemplo de su anfitrión con nerviosismo, Noel Vanstone se armó de valor para enfrentarse con la dura prueba que le esperaba, reclinando la cabeza y apretando las manos en la posición que se asocia familiarmente en todo el mundo civilizado con la que se adopta en la silla del dentista.

El capitán dejó el vaso vació y se aupó de nuevo a su pedestal.

- Hablábamos de capitulaciones -prosiguió-. Le he comentado ya durante nuestra conversación, señor Vanstone, que mi sobrina no puede ofrecer otra dote al hombre elegido por ella que no sea el más inestimable de los regalos, el de su propia persona. Esta circunstancia, sin embargo (como sin duda usted sabe), no me desautoriza para estipular las condiciones habituales con su futuro marido. De acuerdo con el procedimiento normal en tales asuntos, mi abogado se citaría con el suyo, se realizarían consultas, se producirían retrasos, personas extrañas entrarían en conocimiento de sus intenciones y, tarde o temprano, la señora Lecount acabaría sabiendo lo que usted está impaciente por ocultarle. ¿Está usted de acuerdo conmigo hasta aquí?

Una indescriptible aprensión había sellado los labios de Noel Vanstone. Sólo pudo responder inclinando la cabeza.

- Perfectamente -dijo el capitán-. Bien, es posible que haya observado usted que soy un hombre con una original manera de ver las cosas. Si no le he causado esa impresión hasta ahora, puede que sea necesario que le diga que hay ciertos asuntos en los que insisto en tener mis propias ideas. El tema de las capitulaciones matrimoniales es uno de ellos. ¿Qué suele hacer un padre o un tutor, permítame que le pregunte, en la situación en la que yo me hallo? Después de haber confiado el sagrado depósito de la felicidad de una mujer al hombre que ha elegido como yerno, le da la espalda a ese hombre y se niega a confiarle la responsabilidad infinitamente menor de procurar el bienestar económico de su hija. Encadena a su yerno con el documento más comprometedor que la ley puede producir y emplea con el marido de su propia hija las mismas precauciones que usaría si tratara con un desconocido y un granuja. Yo a eso lo llamo una conducta incongruente e impropia en grado sumo. Descubrirá usted, señor Vanstone, que no es mi forma de proceder; no me verá predicar lo que no practico. Si le confío a mi sobrina, le confío también toda responsabilidad menor hacia ella y hacia mí. Déme la mano, señor. Déme su palabra de honor de que procurará el bienestar de su esposa tal como corresponde a la posición que ella tiene y a los medios de que usted dispone, y la cuestión de las capitulaciones queda decidida entre nosotros desde este momento, ¡de una vez para siempre! -Tras obedecer las instrucciones de Magdalen con este tono altanero, se abrió la respetable levita y aguardó sentado con la cabeza erguida y la mano extendida como un modelo de emoción paternal, como la viva imagen de la integridad.

Por un momento, el asombro dejó a Noel Vanstone literalmente petrificado. En el instante siguiente se levantó de su silla y apretó la mano de su magnánimo amigo en un arranque de admiración. En su dilatada y variopinta carrera, jamás el capitán Wragge había tenido tal dificultad en permanecer serio como la que experimentaba entonces. Desprecio por el arrebato de mezquina gratitud de que era objeto; sensación triunfal en el éxito de una conspiración contra el hombre que había valorado su oferta de protección en cinco libras; pesar por la oportunidad perdida de dar un buen golpe de

agricultura moral, que su temor a verse envuelto en las consecuencias venideras le había obligado a dejar escapar; estas emociones diversas turbaban los pensamientos del capitán y luchaban juntas por surgir a la superficie a través de las salidas de su rostro o de su lengua. Dejó que Noel Vanstone se apoderara de su mano y soltara una ristra de protestas y promesas chillonas hasta que recobró su habitual sangre fría. Una vez obtenido este resultado, volvió a sentar al hombrecillo en su silla y regresó de inmediato al asunto de la señora Lecount.

- Supongamos que volvemos ahora a la dificultad que aún no hemos vencido -dijo el capitán-. Digamos que voy en contra de mis propias costumbres y sentimientos, que admito la importancia de las consideraciones que ya he mencionado y que sanciono su deseo de unirse a mi sobrina sin el conocimiento de la señora Lecount. Permítame preguntarle, en ese caso, ¿qué medio sugiere usted para lograr sus fines?

- No puedo sugerir nada -respondió Noel Vanstone con impotencia-. ¿Le importaría sugerir por mí?

- Su petición es más audaz de lo que imagina, señor Vanstone. Yo nunca hago las cosas a medias. Cuando actúo con mi acostumbrada franqueza, soy sincero (como ya sabe usted) hasta rayar en la imprudencia. Cuando circunstancias excepcionales me obligan a seguir el proceder contrario, no hay un zorro más astuto que yo. Si me despojo, a petición expresa de usted, de mi honesta levita inglesa y me visto de jesuita; si por mera conmiseración hacia la difícil posición en la que se encuentra usted, accedo a ocultar el secreto a la señora Lecount, no he de tener que luchar con escrúpulos inoportunos por su parte. Si yo estoy dispuesto a todo o nada, ¡también ha de estarlo usted!

- Todo o nada, por supuesto -dijo Noel Vanstone animadamente-, siempre y cuando sea usted el primero. No siento escrúpulo alguno en dejar a Lecount al margen. Pero es increíblemente taimada, señor Bygrave. ¿Cómo lo conseguiremos?

- Lo oirá ahora mismo de mis labios -respondió el capitán-. Antes de que le exponga mis ideas, me gustaría conocer su opinión sobre una cuestión abstracta de moralidad. ¿Qué piensa usted, mi querido señor, de los engaños piadosos en general?

Noel Vanstone pareció un poco turbado por la pregunta.

- ¿Quiere que me exprese con mayor claridad? -continuó el capitán Wragge-. ¿Qué opina usted de la máxima universalmente aceptada: «Todo vale en el amor y en la guerra»? ¿Sí o no?

- ¡Sí! -respondió Noel Vanstone con la mayor prontitud.

- Una pregunta más y habré terminado -dijo el capitán-. ¿Tiene usted algo que objetar a practicar un engaño piadoso con la señora Lecount?

La determinación de Noel Vanstone empezó a tambalearse un poco.

- ¿Es probable que Lecount lo descubra? -preguntó con cautela.

- Es imposible que lo descubra antes de que estén ustedes casados y fuera de su alcance.

- ¿Está seguro?

- Totalmente.

- Gástele a Lecount todas las malas pasadas que quiera -dijo Noel Vanstone con aspecto de sentir un alivio indescriptible-. Últimamente tenía mis sospechas de que intentaba gobernarme. Empiezo a pensar que ya la he soportado bastante. Ojalá consiguiera deshacerme de ella.

- Se cumplirá su deseo -dijo el capitán Wragge-. Se librará de ella dentro de una semana o diez días.

Noel Vanstone se levantó con ansiedad y se acercó a la silla del capitán.

- ¡No me diga! -exclamó-. ¿Cómo piensa alejarla?

- Pienso mandarla de viaje -respondió el capitán Wragge.

- ¿Adonde?

- De la casa de usted en Aldborough a la cabecera del lecho de su hermano en Zurich.

Noel Vanstone retrocedió al oír la respuesta y regresó súbitamente a su silla.

- ¿Cómo va a conseguirlo? -preguntó con la mayor perplejidad-. Su hermano (¡mal rayo le parta!) está mucho mejor. Esta mañana ha recibido otra carta de Zurich para comunicárselo.

- ¿Ha visto usted la carta?

- Sí. Siempre está preocupada por su hermano; tenía que enseñármela.

- ¿Quién la había escrito y qué decía?

- Era del médico; siempre le escribe él. Me importa un comino su hermano, y no recuerdo demasiado la carta, salvo que era corta. El individuo en cuestión estaba mucho mejor, y si el médico no volvía a escribirle, ella podía dar por sentado que se estaba restableciendo. Eso decía en esencia.

- ¿Se fijó usted en dónde ponía la carta cuando usted se la ha devuelto?

- Sí. La ha metido en el cajón donde guarda sus libros de cuentas.

- ¿Tiene usted acceso a ese cajón?

- Por supuesto. Tengo una copia de la llave; siempre he insistido en tener una copia de la llave del lugar en el que guarda sus libros de cuentas. Jamás permito que se guarden los libros de cuentas bajo llave sin forma de que yo pueda inspeccionarlos; es una norma de la casa.

- Tenga usted la amabilidad de apoderarse hoy de esa carta, señor Vanstone, sin que se entere su ama de llaves, y súmele el favor de dejármela aquí en privado durante una hora o dos.

- ¿Para qué la quiere?

- Tengo que hacerle unas cuantas preguntas más antes de poder decírselo. ¿Tiene usted algún amigo íntimo en Zurich con quien pueda contar para que le ayude a gastarle una mala pasada a la señora Lecount?

- ¿A qué tipo de ayuda se refiere? -preguntó Noel Vanstone.

- Supongamos -dijo el capitán- que enviara una carta dirigida a la señora Lecount, en Aldborough, adjunta a otra carta dirigida a uno de sus amigos del extranjero. Y supongamos que le diera instrucciones a ese amigo para que le ayudara a gastar una broma inofensiva mandando la carta de la señora Lecount desde Zurich. ¿Conoce usted a alguien en quien pudiera confiar para algo así?

- ¡Conozco a dos personas en quien podría confiar! -exclamó Noel Vanstone-. Ambas señoras, ambas solteronas, ambas enemigas acérrimas de Lecount. Pero ¿cuál es su propósito, señor Bygrave? Aunque no suele fallarme la perspicacia, no acabo de ver cuál es su propósito.

- Lo verá ahora mismo, señor Vanstone.

El capitán se levantó entonces, se retiró a su escritorio del rincón y escribió unas

cuantas líneas en una hoja de papel de cartas. Después de leerlas cuidadosamente en silencio, hizo señas a Noel Vanstone para que se acercara también él a leerlas.

- Hace unos minutos -dijo el capitán señalando, satisfecho, su propia redacción con la punta de la pluma-, he tenido el honor de sugerir un piadoso engaño para la persona de la señora Lecount. ¡Aquí lo tiene!

Cedió la silla del escritorio a su visitante. Noel Vanstone se sentó y leyó lo siguiente:

Mi querida señora: Desde que le escribí por última vez, lamento profundamente tener que informarle que su hermano ha sufrido una recaída. Los síntomas son de naturaleza tan grave que es mi doloroso deber pedirle a usted que acuda a su lado sin dilación. No escatimo esfuerzos para evitar el renovado avance de la enfermedad y no he perdido aún toda esperanza de éxito, pero no tendría la conciencia tranquila si la dejara a usted en la ignorancia del grave empeoramiento de mi paciente, que podría acompañarse de un fatídico desenlace. Con mi más sentido pesar, quedo de usted, etc., etc.

El capitán Wragge aguardó con cierta inquietud el efecto que podía producir aquella carta. Aun siendo mezquino, egoísta y cobarde, incluso Noel Vanstone podía sentir ciertos escrúpulos en practicar la superchería que sugería la carta contra una mujer con la posición que ocupaba la señora Lecount en su casa. La señora Lecount le había servido fielmente, por muy interesados que fueran sus motivos; había vivido desde que él era un muchacho disfrutando de la plena confianza de su padre; vivía ahora bajo la protección de su propio techo. ¿Podría olvidar todo eso? Y si lo recordaba, ¿podría prestar su ayuda a la estratagema propuesta sin vacilar? Inconscientemente, el capitán Wragge conservaba la suficiente fe en la naturaleza humana para dudarlo. Para su sorpresa y, todo que hay que decirlo, también para su alivio, sus temores resultaron totalmente infundados. Las únicas emociones que despertó en Noel Vanstone la lectura de la carta fueron una sincera admiración por la idea de su amigo y una impaciencia vanagloriosa por atribuirse el mérito de ser la persona que la pusiera en práctica. Todos los días podríamos hallar ejemplos de tontos que no sean cobardes; de vez en cuando pueden hallarse ejemplos de idiotas que no son astutos, pero puede dudarse con razón de que exista un solo ejemplo en lugar alguno de un tonto que no sea cruel.

- ¡Perfecto! -exclamó Noel Vanstone, dando una palmada-. Señor Bygrave, es usted tan bueno como el Fígaro de la comedia francesa. Hablando de Francia, hay un grave error en esta inteligente carta suya; está escrita en un idioma equivocado. Cuando el médico escribe a Lecount, le escribe en francés. ¿Quizá quería pedirme usted que la tradujera? Necesita que yo le ayude, ¿no es cierto? Yo escribo en francés con tanta fluidez como en inglés. ¡Fíjese en mí! La traduciré aquí mismo de un plumazo.

Noel Vanstone efectuó la traducción casi con la misma rapidez con que el capitán Wragge había redactado el original.

- ¡Espere un momento! -exclamó con severo y triunfal tono de censura al descubrir otro defecto en la redacción de su ingenioso amigo-. El médico siempre fecha sus cartas. En la suya no hay fecha.

- La fecha se la dejo a usted -dijo el capitán con una sonrisa sardónica-. Usted ha descubierto el fallo, mi querido señor. ¡Corríjalo, por favor!

Noel Vanstone contempló mentalmente el gran abismo que separa la capacidad de detectar un error de la capacidad para aplicar un remedio y, siguiendo el ejemplo de más de un hombre más sabio que él, se negó a traspasarlo.

- No podría tomarme esa libertad -dijo cortésmente-. ¿Quizá tenía usted un motivo para no poner la fecha?

- Quizá lo tenía -respondió el capitán Wragge con su buen humor más desenfadado-. La

fecha dependerá del tiempo que tarde la carta en llegar a Zurich. Yo no tengo experiencia sobre ese punto, usted debió de tener mucha en vida de su padre. Hágame partícipe de esa información y añadiré la fecha antes de que abandone usted el escritorio.

La experiencia de Noel Vanstone fue, como el capitán Wragge había previsto, absolutamente apta para resolver la cuestión del tiempo. Las vías férreas en el Continente (en el año de mil ochocientos cuarenta y siete) eran escasas, y una carta enviada en aquella época desde Inglaterra hasta Zurich y de vuelta desde Zurich hasta Inglaterra tardaba diez días en realizar el viaje por correo.

- Ponga, en francés, la fecha de dentro de cinco días a partir de mañana -dijo el capitán, una vez obtenida la información-. Perfecto. Lo siguiente es traerme la carta del médico lo antes posible. Puede que me vea obligado a practicar unas cuantas horas antes de poder copiar su traducción con una imitación exacta de la letra del médico. ¿Tiene usted papel de cartas extranjero? Déme también unas cuantas hojas, y al mismo tiempo envíeme un sobre dirigido a una de esas señoras amigas suyas de Zurich, acompañado de la necesaria petición de que envíe por correo la carta adjunta. Ésa es toda la molestia que le voy a causar, señor Vanstone. No quisiera parecer poco hospitalario, pero cuanto antes pueda proporcionarme el material que necesito, más me complacerá. Supongo que nos entendemos perfectamente. Tras concederle la mano de mi sobrina, he sancionado una ceremonia privada en atención a las especiales circunstancias de usted. Una pequeña e inofensiva estratagema es necesaria para promover sus fines. Yo ideo la estratagema a petición suya y usted hace uso de ella sin la menor vacilación. El resultado es que, dentro de diez días a partir de mañana, la señora Lecount se hallará de camino a Suiza; dentro de quince días a partir de mañana, la señora Lecount llegará a Zurich y descubrirá nuestra jugarreta; dentro de veinte días a partir de mañana, la señora Lecount estará de vuelta en Aldborough y encontrará las participaciones de boda de su amo sobre la mesa, y a su amo en viaje de luna de miel. Se lo expongo de manera aritmética para que quede claro. Que Dios le bendiga. ¡Buenos días!

- Supongo que tendré el placer de ver a la señorita Bygrave mañana -dijo Noel Vanstone, dando media vuelta al llegar a la puerta.

- Debemos ser precavidos -replicó el capitán Wragge-. No se lo negaré mañana, pero no le prometo nada después. Permítame recordarle que tenemos que ocuparnos de la señora Lecount durante los próximos diez días.

- ¡Ojalá Lecount estuviera en el fondo del océano Alemán! -exclamó Noel Vanstone con ardor-. Para usted es muy fácil ocuparse de ella, no vive en la misma casa. ¿Qué voy a hacer yo?

- Se lo diré mañana -dijo el capitán-. Salga a pasear solo y pásese por aquí como hoy, a las dos. Mientras tanto, no olvide todo lo que tiene que enviarme. Póngalo todo junto en un sobre grande y ciérrelo. Cuando lo haya hecho, pídale a la señora Lecount que salga a pasear con usted como de costumbre y, mientras ella esté arriba poniéndose el sombrero, envíeme a la criada. ¿Me ha comprendido? Buenos días.

Una hora después, el sobre cerrado y su contenido llegaron a salvo a manos del capitán Wragge. La doble tarea de imitar exactamente una letra extraña y copiar con precisión unas palabras escritas en un idioma del que apenas tenía unas nociones presentó más dificultades de las que el capitán había previsto. Dieron las once antes de que completara con éxito la tarea emprendida y de que la carta para Zurich estuviera lista para ser enviada por correo.

Antes de acostarse, el capitán salió al paseo desierto para respirar el frío aire nocturno. Todas las luces estaban apagadas en Sea-View Cottage cuando miró en esa dirección, excepto la luz de la ventana del ama de llaves. El capitán Wragge meneó la cabeza con suspicacia. Tenía ya la suficiente experiencia para desconfiar del insomnio de la señora Lecount.

CAPÍTULO IX

De haber podido asomarse a la habitación de la señora Lecount mientras se hallaba en el paseo contemplando la luz de su ventana, el capitán Wragge hubiera visto al ama de llaves sentada y absorta en reflexiones sobre un pequeño e insignificante trozo de tela marrón que yacía sobre su tocador.

Por exasperante que pudiera ser esa conclusión, la señora Lecount no podía por menos que darse cuenta de que hasta entonces le habían presentado batalla y vencido en todos los aspectos. ¿Qué podía hacer? Si reclamaba la presencia del señor Pendril, cuando el abogado llegara a Aldborough (con sólo unas pocas horas robadas a sus asuntos para dedicarlas a ella), ¿qué acciones concretas podía emprender? Si ella mostraba a Noel Vanstone la carta original de la que había copiado la nota, inmediatamente su amo pediría explicaciones a su autora y pondría al descubierto la historia inventada con la que la señora Lecount había conseguido engañar a la señorita Garth y, en cualquier caso, seguiría declarando, basándose en el testimonio de sus propios ojos, que la prueba de las marcas del cuello había fracasado por completo. La mayor de las señoritas Vanstone, cuya inesperada presencia en Aldborough podría haber hecho milagros, cuya voz en el vestíbulo de North Shingles, aunque no le dejaran ir más allá, podría haber llegado a oídos de su hermana y producido resultados inmediatos, se hallaba fuera del país y no era probable que regresara en menos de un mes. La señora Lecount revisó con impaciencia los pasos que había dado hasta entonces y aun así no consiguió hallar el modo de derribar los obstáculos que impedían su avance.

Otras mujeres, en su situación, hubieran esperado quizá a que cambiaran las circunstancias y les sirvieran de ayuda. La señora Lecount volvió audazmente sobre sus pasos y resolvió hallar el camino hacia sus fines en una nueva dirección. Abandonando por el momento su empeño en demostrar que la falsa señorita Bygrave era la auténtica Magdalen Vanstone, decidió reducir el campo de acción de sus siguientes pasos, dejar la cuestión de la identidad de Magdalen tal como estaba, y conformarse con convencer a su amo de un simple hecho: de que la señorita que lo hechizaba en North Shingles y la mujer disfrazada que lo había aterrorizado en Vauxhall Walk eran la misma persona.

Los medios para llevar a cabo este nuevo objetivo eran, en apariencia, menos fáciles de lograr que los necesarios para el objetivo al que la señora Lecount acababa de renunciar. Aquí no podía esperar ayuda de otros, no podía presentar supuestos motivos benevolentes para protegerse, ni podía recurrir al señor Pendril ni a la señorita Garth. Aquí, la única posibilidad de éxito del ama de llaves dependía en primer lugar de que fuera capaz de entrar furtivamente en la casa del señor Bygrave y, en segundo lugar, de su habilidad para descubrir si el memorable vestido de alpaca del que había cortado secretamente un trozo de tela formaba parte por casualidad del guardarropa de la señorita Bygrave.

La señora Lecount examinó las dificultades que tenía ante ella en el orden en que se presentaban. Decidió en primer lugar dedicar los días siguientes a vigilar a los habitantes de North Shingles y estudiar sus costumbres desde por la mañana temprano hasta entrada la noche, y probar la capacidad de la única criada de la casa para resistirse a la tentación de un soborno. Suponiendo que iba a tener éxito, bien mediante dinero, bien mediante una estratagema, y que conseguiría entrar en North Shingles (sin el conocimiento del señor Bygrave ni de su sobrina), abordó la segunda dificultad, la de tener acceso al guardarropa de la señorita Bygrave.

Si la criada resultaba ser corruptible, podía considerar eliminados de antemano todos los obstáculos en esa dirección. Pero si la criada resultaba ser honrada, su problema no sería fácil de resolver.

Largas y cuidadosas meditaciones condujeron por fin al ama de llaves a la audaz decisión de obtener una entrevista -si le fallaba la criada- con la propia señora Bygrave. ¿Cuál era la verdadera causa de la extraña reclusión de aquella señora? ¿Se trataba de

una persona de una estricta y sumamente inconveniente integridad o de una persona en la que no se podía confiar para guardar un secreto? ¿O bien, de una persona tan ingeniosa como el señor Bygrave a la que mantenían en reserva para contribuir al éxito de un nuevo y futuro engaño? En los dos primeros casos, la señora Lecount confiaría en sus dotes de disimulo y en los resultados que con ellas pudiera lograr. En el último caso (aunque no consiguiera nada más), podía ser de vital importancia para ella descubrir a un enemigo oculto en las sombras. Sea como fuere, resolvió correr el riesgo. De las tres posibilidades a su favor que había calculado al inicio de la contienda -la posibilidad de atrapar a Magdalen haciéndola hablar, la posibilidad de atrapar a Magdalen con ayuda de sus allegados, y la de atraparla a través de la señora Bygrave- había intentado dos y las dos habían fracasado. La tercera aún debía ponerse a prueba, y tal vez diera sus frutos.

De este modo conspiraba la enemiga del capitán en la intimidad de su habitación, mientras el capitán observaba la luz de su ventana desde la playa.

A la mañana siguiente antes del desayuno, el capitán Wragge echó al correo en persona la carta falsificada para Zurich. Volvió a North Shingles sin haber decidido aún qué camino seguir con la señora Lecount durante el intervalo crucial de los diez días siguientes.

Con gran sorpresa por su parte, sus dudas en aquel punto las resolvió bruscamente la propia Magdalen.

La encontró esperándole en la habitación donde estaba servido el desayuno. Magdalen paseaba con nerviosismo de un lado a otro con la cabeza caída sobre el pecho y los cabellos desordenados sobre los hombros. En cuanto alzó la vista al verlo entrar, el capitán sintió el miedo que antes había sentido la señora Wragge, el miedo a que Magdalen volviera a caer postrada como le había ocurrido ya cuando recibió la carta de Frank en Vauxhall Walk.

- ¿Va a volver hoy? -preguntó, apartando de sí la silla que le ofrecía el capitán Wragge tan violentamente que la tiró al suelo.

- Sí -dijo el capitán, respondiendo sensatamente con la menor cantidad de palabras posible-. Volverá a las dos.

- ¡Sáqueme de aquí! -exclamó Magdalen, echándose el pelo hacia atrás con un gesto frenético-. Sáqueme de aquí antes de que venga. No podré sobreponerme al horror de casarme con él mientras esté en este horrible lugar. ¡Lléveme a algún sitio donde pueda olvidarlo o me volveré loca! Déme dos días de descanso, dos días lejos de la vista de ese horrible mar, dos días fuera de la prisión en esta horrible casa, dos días en cualquier lugar del ancho mundo, lejos de Aldborough. ¡Volveré con usted! ¡Llegaré hasta el final! ¡Pero déjeme huir dos días de ese hombre y de todo lo que se relaciona con él! ¿Me oye, canalla? -gritó, sujetándole por el brazo y sacudiéndolo en un paroxismo de ira-. Ya basta de esta tortura. ¡No puedo soportarlo más!

No había más que un modo de tranquilizarla, y el capitán hizo uso de él al instante.

- Si intenta dominarse -dijo-, abandonará Aldborough dentro de una hora.

Magdalen le soltó el brazo y apoyó pesadamente la espalda contra la pared.

- Lo intentaré -dijo, respirando entrecortadamente, pero mirándole con más calma-. No tendrá queja de mí si puedo evitarlo. -Intentó torpemente sacar su pañuelo del bolsillo del delantal y no consiguió encontrarlo. El capitán lo sacó por ella. La mirada de Magdalen se suavizó y respiró con mayor facilidad cuando cogió el pañuelo de su mano-. Es usted un hombre más bueno de lo que pensaba -dijo-. Siento haberle hablado de ese modo hace un momento. Lo siento mucho. -Unas lágrimas furtivas afluyeron a sus ojos y ofreció la mano al capitán con la gracia y la amabilidad sinceras de tiempos más felices-. Sea mi amigo de nuevo -dijo con tono suplicante-. ¡Sólo soy una muchacha,

capitán Wragge, sólo soy una muchacha!

El capitán recibió su mano en silencio, le dio unas cuantas palmaditas y luego le abrió la puerta para que volviera a su cuarto. El rostro del capitán mostraba un auténtico pesar cuando tuvo con ella aquella insignificante atención. Era un truhán y un timador, había llevado una vida ruin, tramposa y envilecida, pero era humano, y Magdalen había conseguido despertar la compasión perdida que ni siquiera la autoprofanación de la existencia de un timador podía destruir por completo.

- ¡Al cuerno con el desayuno! -dijo el capitán cuando entró la criada, dispuesta a recibir órdenes-. Vete a la posada inmediatamente y diles que quiero un carruaje y un tronco de caballos en la puerta dentro de una hora. -Salió al pasillo irritado aún por una sensación de perturbación mental nueva para él y gritó a su mujer más furioso que nunca-. ¡Haga el equipaje para una semana de ausencia, y que esté listo en media hora! -Tras dar estas instrucciones, regresó al comedor y miró la mesa a medio poner con impaciente asombro ante sus pocas ganas de hacerle los honores a la comida-. Me ha quitado el apetito -se dijo a sí mismo con una carcajada forzada-. Probaré con un cigarro y un poco de aire fresco.

De haber sido veinte años más joven, tal vez aquellos remedios habrían fracasado. Pero ¿dónde se halla el hombre cuya política interior sucumba a una revolución cuando ese hombre pasa ya de los cincuenta? El ejercicio y el cambio de escenario serenaron al capitán. Recobró la sensación perdida del aroma de su cigarro y condujo su atención dispersa hacia la cuestión de su inminente ausencia de Aldborough. Unos pocos minutos de reflexión le convencieron de que el estallido de Magdalen le había obligado a tomar las medidas que, volviendo a analizar las urgencias existentes, era más deseable adoptar.

Las indagaciones del capitán Wragge, la tarde en que él y Magdalen habían tomado el té en Sea-View, le habían informado de que el hermano del ama de llaves tenía una modesta renta, que su hermana era su pariente viva más cercana, y que había en Zurich ciertos primos sin escrúpulos que estaban impacientes por usurpar el lugar del testamento que en realidad pertenecía a la señora Lecount. Aquéllos eran poderosos motivos para llevar al ama de llaves hasta Zurich cuando la falsa noticia de la recaída de su hermano llegara a Inglaterra. Pero si llegaba a tener idea de la auténtica situación de Noel Vanstone mientras tanto, ¿quién podía decir si no preferiría, en el último momento, asegurar el amplio interés pecuniario por su amo antes que defender el pequeño interés pecuniario junto a la cabecera de su hermano? Mientras esta pregunta quedara sin resolver, la necesidad evidente de interrumpir la creciente intimidad entre Noel Vanstone y la familia de North Shingles no admitía duda, y de todas las formas de llevar a cabo ese propósito, ninguna podía resultar menos sospechosa que una ausencia temporal de su residencia en Aldborough. Completamente satisfecho con la sensatez de esta conclusión, el capitán Wragge se dirigió directamente a Sea-View Cottage para disculparse y dar explicaciones antes de que llegara el carruaje y se produjera la partida.

Noel Vanstone era fácilmente accesible a las visitas; se hallaba paseando en el jardín antes de desayunar. Dio rienda suelta a su decepción y su disgusto cuando oyó la noticia que su amigo tenía que comunicarle. Sin embargo, la soltura verbal del capitán Wragge pronto consiguió convencerle de la necesidad de resignarse, dadas las circunstancias. La mera insinuación de que «el fraude piadoso» podía fracasar si ocurría algo en el intervalo de diez días que diera alguna pista a la señora Lecount tuvo el efecto instantáneo de volver a Noel Vanstone tan paciente y dócil como era de desear.

- No le diré adonde vamos por dos buenas razones -dijo el capitán Wragge cuando concluyeron las explicaciones preliminares-. En primer lugar, aún no lo he decidido, y en segundo lugar, si no sabe usted cuál es nuestro destino, la señora Lecount no podrá sonsacarle. No me cabe la menor duda de que nos está observando ahora mismo desde detrás de la cortina de su ventana. Cuando le pregunte qué quería de usted esta mañana, dígale que he venido a despedirme por unos cuantos días, porque mi sobrina sigue sin encontrarse bien y deseo llevarla a hacer una corta visita a unos amigos para probar con un cambio de aires. Si pudiera producir usted la impresión en la señora

Lecount (sin exagerar) de que yo le he decepcionado un poco y de que empieza a dudar de mi sinceridad en el deseo de cultivar su amistad, contribuirá usted en gran medida a lograr nuestros fines. Puede usted contar con que regresaremos a North Shingles en cuatro o cinco días como mucho. Si tuviera algo que comunicarle, el servicio de correos está siempre a nuestra disposición y no dejaré de escribirle.

- ¿No me escribirá la señorita Bygrave? -preguntó Noel Vanstone con tono lastimero-. ¿Sabe ella que ha venido? ¿No le ha dado ningún mensaje para mí?

- ¡Imperdonable por mi parte haberlo olvidado! -exclamó el capitán-. Le envía todo su amor.

Noel Vanstone cerró los ojos en un mudo éxtasis.

Cuando los abrió de nuevo, el capitán Wragge había salido ya por la verja del jardín y se encaminaba de regreso a North Shingles. Tan pronto como se cerró la puerta, la señora Lecount bajó del puesto de observación, que el capitán Wragge había sospechado acertadamente que ocupaba, y dirigió a su amo la pregunta que el capitán había previsto acertadamente que haría tras su partida. La respuesta que recibió tuvo un único efecto. El ama de llaves consideró inmediatamente que era una falsedad y regresó a su ventana para vigilar North Shingles más alerta que nunca.

Con el mayor de los asombros, menos de media hora después vio que un carruaje vacío se detenía a la puerta del señor Bygrave. Sacaron el equipaje y lo cargaron en el vehículo. Apareció la señorita Bygrave y ocupó un asiento en él. Le siguió una señora de gran estatura que el ama de llaves supuso que debía de ser la señora Wragge. A continuación salió la criada y se quedó esperando en el sendero del jardín. El último en aparecer fue el señor Bygrave. Cerró la puerta de la casa y llevó la llave a una casa cercana que era la morada del propietario de North Shingles. A su regreso, saludó con una inclinación de cabeza a la criada -que se alejó hacia la parte más modesta de la pequeña población- y se metió en el carruaje con las señoras. El cochero subió al pescante y el vehículo desapareció.

La señora Lecount bajó los prismáticos de ópera que había utilizado para vigilar de cerca tales movimientos con una impotente sensación de perplejidad que casi le avergonzaba admitir. Los motivos por los que el señor Bygrave vaciaba de repente su casa de Aldborough de toda criatura viviente eran un misterio impenetrable para ella.

Sometiéndose a las circunstancias con una pronta resignación que el capitán Wragge no había demostrado, por su parte, en una situación similar, la señora Lecount no perdió tiempo ni energías en especulaciones inútiles. Dejó que el misterio aumentara o se aclarara, eso lo diría el futuro, y consideró exclusivamente el provecho que podía sacar a los acontecimientos. Fuera cual fuese el destino de la familia de North Shingles, la criada seguía allí, y la criada era exactamente la persona cuya ayuda podía ser de vital importancia para los planes del ama de llaves. La señora Lecount se puso el sombrero, examinó el suelto que llevaba en el portamonedas y se puso en marcha de inmediato, dispuesta a trabar relación con la criada.

Primero fue a la casa donde el señor Bygrave había dejado la llave de North Shingles para averiguar la dirección de la criada por boca del propietario. En este punto sus pesquisas se vieron coronadas por el éxito. El propietario sabía que se había permitido a la chica volver a casa de sus parientes durante unos días y también en qué parte de Aldborough vivían esos parientes. Pero aquí sus fuentes de información se secaban de pronto. No sabía nada del destino al que se dirigía el señor Bygrave con su familia e ignoraba por completo durante cuántos días se extendería su ausencia. Lo único que podía decir era que su inquilino no le había notificado que fuera a dejar la casa y que le había pedido que guardara la llave hasta que el señor Bygrave regresara a reclamarla en persona.

Desconcertada, pero no desanimada, la señora Lecount encaminó sus pasos a continuación hacia la callejuela de Aldborough y dejó atónitos a los parientes de la criada confiriéndoles el honor de una visita matinal.

Fácilmente persuadida desde el principio por el pretexto de la señora Lecount de que quería contratarla, dado que tenía la impresión de que había dejado el servicio del señor Bygrave, la criada hizo cuanto pudo por contestar a sus preguntas, pero sabía tan poco de los planes de su amo como el propietario de la casa. Apenas pudo decir sino que no la habían despedido y que debía aguardar la recepción de una nota reclamando su presencia en North Shingles cuando fuera necesario. La señora Lecount, que no esperaba hallarla mejor informada sobre aquella parte del asunto, cambió hábilmente de tema y llevó a la mujer a comentar las ventajas e inconvenientes de su colocación en la familia del señor Bygrave.

La señora Lecount sacó provecho de la información obtenida mediante aquel método indirecto sobre los pequeños secretos de la casa, e hizo dos descubrimientos. Averiguó, en primer lugar, que la criada (que bastante tenía ya con atender a la parte más dura de las tareas domésticas) no se hallaba en situación de desvelar los secretos del guardarropa de la señorita Bygrave, que sólo conocían ella misma y su tía. En segundo lugar, el ama de llaves averiguó que el verdadero motivo de la rígida reclusión de la señora Bygrave se debía al simple hecho de que era poco menos que una idiota y a que seguramente su marido se avergonzaba de que la vieran en público. Estos descubrimientos aparentemente triviales aclararon a la señora Lecount un punto muy importante que antes estaba envuelto en la duda. Se convenció ahora de que el medio más probable de poder examinar el guardarropa de Magdalen personalmente consistiría en engañar a la señora imbécil en lugar de sobornar a la criada ignorante.

Tras haber llegado a esta conclusión -preñada de amenazas para la discreción débilmente reforzada de la pobre señora Wragge-, la cauta ama de llaves se abstuvo de mostrarse más tiempo en su aspecto inquisitivo. Desvió la conversación hacia temas locales, esperó hasta estar segura de haber causado una excelente impresión y se despidió.

Tres días pasaron y la señora Lecount y su amo -cada uno con sus propios y distintos fines- aguardaban con igual expectación los primeros signos de vida en la dirección de North Shingles. En ese tiempo, no llegó ninguna carta del tío ni de la sobrina para Noel Vanstone. Su sincero sentimiento de irritación por aquel trato negligente contribuyó en gran medida a dar autenticidad a las dudas fingidas sobre los amigos ausentes que el capitán le había recomendado expresar en presencia del ama de llaves. Noel Vanstone confesó su temor de haberse equivocado, no sólo con el señor Bygrave, sino también con su sobrina, con un aire de fastidio tan genuino que acabó aportando un nuevo elemento de confusión a las incertidumbres que ya tenía la señora Lecount.

En la mañana del cuarto día, Noel Vanstone salió al encuentro del cartero en el jardín y, con gran alivio por su parte, descubrió una nota del señor Bygrave entre las cartas que le entregó.

La nota llevaba el matasellos de Woodbridge y contenía tan sólo unas líneas. El señor Bygrave señalaba que su sobrina se encontraba mejor y que seguía enviándole todo su amor. Se proponía regresar a Aldborough al día siguiente, en que tendría ciertas consideraciones que presentar a la atención del señor Noel Vanstone de carácter estrictamente personal. Mientras tanto, rogaba al señor Vanstone que no acudiera a North Shingles hasta que recibiera una invitación expresa, lo cual ocurriría sin duda el día en que regresara la familia. El motivo de esta petición en apariencia extraña sería expuesto a entera satisfacción del señor Vanstone cuando se reuniera una vez más con sus amigos. Hasta que llegara ese momento, se le imponía la más estricta cautela en todas sus conversaciones con la señora Lecount y la destrucción instantánea de la carta, tras haberla examinado debidamente, era (si le perdonaba la expresión clásica) una condición *sine qua non*.

Llegó el quinto día. Noel Vanstone (tras someterse al *sine qua non* y destruir la carta) aguardó con impaciencia los resultados, mientras la señora Lecount, por su parte, vigilaba pacientemente a la espera de acontecimientos. Hacia las tres de la tarde, el carruaje apareció de nuevo en la puerta de North Shingles. El señor Bygrave se apeó y

se dirigió con paso ligero a la casa del propietario en busca de la llave. Regresó seguido de la criada. La señorita Bygrave bajó del carruaje, su gigantesca pariente siguió su ejemplo, se abrió la puerta de la casa, se bajaron los baúles, el carruaje desapareció, ¡y los Bygrave volvieron a ocupar la casa!

Dieron las cuatro, las cinco, las seis, y no ocurrió nada. Media hora más y el señor Bygrave -atildado, elegante y respetable como siempre- apareció en el paseo caminando tranquilamente en dirección a Sea-View.

Pasó por delante de la casa en lugar de entrar en ella, se detuvo como asaltado súbitamente por una idea y, volviendo sobre sus pasos, preguntó por el señor Vanstone en la puerta. El señor Vanstone salió al pasillo como gesto hospitalario. Alzando la voz a un tono que pudiera ser fácilmente oído por cualquier persona que escuchara a través de cualquier puerta abierta de los dormitorios de arriba, el señor Bygrave anunció el objeto de su visita sin pasar del felpudo de la puerta y del modo más sucinto posible. Había estado de visita en casa de un pariente lejano. Dicho pariente poseía dos cuadros -auténticas joyas de los viejos maestros- que estaba dispuesto a vender y que había confiado al cuidado del señor Bygrave con tal fin. Si el señor Noel Vanstone, como aficionado en tales temas, deseaba ver aquellas joyas, estarían dispuestas media hora después, cuando el señor Bygrave regresara a North Shingles.

Una vez hecho este incomprensible anuncio, el archiconspirador se puso un significativo dedo índice en un lado de la corta nariz romana, dijo: «Bonito día, ¿verdad? ¡Buenas tardes!», y se alejó a paso lento e inescrutable con la intención de continuar su paseo.

Al expirar la media hora de plazo, Noel Vanstone se presentó en North Shingles con el ardor de un enamorado abrasando su pecho con fuego inextinguible y bajo la neblina mental de un hombre absolutamente perplejo. Con inexpresable felicidad, halló a Magdalen sola en la salita. Jamás la había visto tan hermosa. El descanso y el alivio de cuatro días lejos de Aldborough habían dado resultado; Magdalen volvía a ser dueña de sí misma. Oscilando siempre entre un extremo y otro igualmente violentos, había pasado de la furiosa desesperación de hacía cinco días a una enfebrecida exaltación del ánimo que desafiaba todo remordimiento y hacía frente a todas las consecuencias. Con los ojos centelleantes y las mejillas arreboladas, Magdalen parloteó sin cesar en una desesperada imitación de la alegría juvenil de otros tiempos, rió con una deplorable persistencia en su risa, e imitó la voz meliflua de la señora Lecount y sus modales zalameros con una semblanza exagerada del original que no era más que el burdo reflejo de sus imitaciones delicadamente precisas de antaño. Noel Vanstone, que no la había visto nunca de esa manera, quedó embelesado; la débil cabeza le daba vueltas, embriagada de deleite; sus mejillas marchitas se encendieron como contagiadas por la infección de Magdalen. La media hora que estuvo a solas con ella le parecieron cinco minutos. Cuando hubo transcurrido ese tiempo y ella le dejó de pronto -para obedecer a su tía, que la había llamado a su presencia previamente-, pese a su mezquindad, Noel Vanstone hubiera pagado en ese momento de su bolsillo cinco soberanos de oro por cinco dorados minutos más en su compañía.

Apenas había cerrado la puerta Magdalen cuando volvió a abrirse y apareció el capitán, que dio comienzo a las explicaciones que lógicamente su visitante esperaba de él, con la brusquedad informal de un hombre acuciado por las prisas y resuelto a aprovechar al máximo el poco tiempo de que disponía.

- Desde que nos vimos por última vez -empezó-, he estado analizando las posibilidades a nuestro favor y en contra, dada nuestra situación actual. El resultado, en mi opinión, es éste: si sigue usted en Aldborough cuando llegue la carta de Zurich para la señora Lecount, todos nuestros esfuerzos habrán sido en vano. Ni cincuenta hermanos moribundos conseguirían que su ama de llaves le dejara a usted solo en Sea-View mientras nosotros seamos sus vecinos en North Shingles.

La consternación hizo que las mejillas encendidas de Noel Vanstone palidecieran. Su propio conocimiento de la señora Lecount le decía que aquel punto de vista era correcto.

- Si nosotros nos vamos de nuevo -prosiguió el capitán-, nada conseguiremos, pues nada persuadirá a su ama de llaves, en ese caso, de que no he hallado el medio de hacer que nos siga. Es usted quien debe marcharse de Aldborough esta vez y, lo que es más, debe marcharse sin dejar la menor pista visible que nos permita seguirle. Si logramos este objetivo en los cinco días siguientes, la señora Lecount emprenderá el viaje a Zurich. Si fracasamos, dé por cierto que no habrá quien la mueva de Sea-View. ¡No haga preguntas! Tengo unas instrucciones claras que darle y quiero que me escuche con la mayor atención. Su boda con mi sobrina depende de que no olvide una sola palabra de lo que voy a decirle. Una pregunta primero. ¿Ha seguido usted mi consejo? ¿Le ha dicho a Lecount que empieza a creer que estaba equivocado respecto a mí?

- He hecho algo peor -replicó Noel Vanstone con aire penitente-. He ultrajado mis propios sentimientos. ¡Me he abochornado a mí mismo diciendo que dudaba de la señorita Bygrave!

- ¡Siga abochornándose, mi querido señor! Dude de nosotros dos con todas sus fuerzas; yo le ayudaré. Una pregunta más. ¿He hablado lo bastante alto esta tarde? ¿Me ha oído la señora Lecount?

- Sí. Lecount ha abierto su puerta; Lecount le ha oído. ¿Por qué me ha dado ese mensaje? Aquí no veo ningún cuadro. ¿Se trata de un nuevo engaño piadoso, señor Bygrave?

- ¡Admirable acierto, señor Vanstone! Comprenderá usted el propósito de mi imaginario trato pictórico en las siguientes palabras que voy a dirigirle. Cuando vuelva usted a Sea-View, esto es lo que tiene que decirle a la señora Lecount. Dígale que las obras de arte de mi pariente son dos cuadros sin valor alguno, copias de los viejos maestros que he intentado venderle como originales a un precio exorbitante. Dígale que sospecha que no soy más que un impostor convincente pero poco de fiar, y compadezca a mi pobre sobrina por estar asociada a un bribón como yo. Ésta es la idea general. Diga con profusión de palabras lo que yo acabo de decir con pocas. Puede usted hacerlo, ¿no?

- Por supuesto que puedo hacerlo -dijo Noel Vanstone-. Pero le diré una cosa. Lecount no me creerá.

- Espere un poco, señor Vanstone, aún no he acabado con mis instrucciones. ¿Ha comprendido lo que acabo de decirle? Perfectamente. Pasemos de hoy a mañana. Mañana salga con la señora Lecount a la hora habitual. Yo me encontraré con ustedes y le saludaré inclinando la cabeza. En lugar de devolverme el saludo, vuelva el rostro. En pocas palabras, ¡niégueme el saludo! Es algo bien sencillo, ¿no?

- No me creerá, señor Bygrave, ¡no me creerá!

- Espere un poco más, señor Vanstone. Aún hay más instrucciones. Sabe usted lo que ha de hacer hoy y sabe lo que ha de hacer mañana. Ahora hablaremos de pasado mañana. Pasado mañana será el séptimo día desde que enviamos la carta a Zurich. El séptimo día, niéguese a salir a pasear como el anterior, por miedo al fastidio de encontrarse conmigo de nuevo. Laméntese de lo pequeño que es este lugar, quéjese de mala salud, exprese su deseo de no haber venido jamás a Aldborough y de no haber conocido a los Bygrave, y cuando haya fastidiado bien a la señora Lecount con su descontento, pregúntele de repente si no podría sugerir un cambio para mejor. Si se lo pregunta con naturalidad, ¿cree usted que podemos contar con que le conteste?

- No hará falta que le pregunte nada -respondió Noel Vanstone con irritación-. Sólo tengo que decir que estoy cansado de Aldborough, y si me cree (pero no me creerá, estoy convencido, señor Bygrave, ¡no me creerá!), tendrá preparada su sugerencia antes de que yo pueda pedírsela.

- ¡Ay, ay! -dijo el capitán con vehemencia-. ¿Hay un lugar, entonces, al que la señora Lecount desea ir este otoño?

- Quiere ir allí (¡maldita sea su estampa!) cada otoño.

- ¿Ir adonde?

- A la residencia del almirante Bartram; no lo conoce usted, ¿no?; en St. Crux-in-the-Marsh.

- ¡No se impaciente, señor Vanstone! Lo que me dice ahora es de la mayor importancia para nuestros objetivos. ¿Quién es el almirante Bartram?

- Un viejo amigo de mi padre. El almirante le debía ciertos favores; mi padre le prestó dinero cuando ambos eran jóvenes. Soy como uno de la familia en St. Crux, siempre tienen lista mi habitación. Claro que el almirante no tiene familia, excepto su sobrino, George Bartram. George es mi primo; George y yo somos tan íntimos como lo eran mi padre y el almirante, y he sido más listo que mi padre, pues no le he prestado dinero a mi amigo. Lecount siempre hace gala de lo mucho que le gusta George, creo que para fastidiarme. También le gusta el almirante: él halaga su vanidad. Siempre la invita a acompañarme a St. Crux, le asigna uno de sus mejores dormitorios y la trata como si fuera una dama. Lecount es tan orgullosa como Lucifer, le gusta que la traten como a una dama, y cada otoño me atosiga para ir a St. Crux. ¿Qué ocurre? ¿Para qué saca ahora la cartera?

- Quiero la dirección del almirante, señor Vanstone, por una razón que le explicaré inmediatamente.

El capitán Wragge abrió la cartera y escribió la dirección que le dictaba Noel Vanstone como sigue: «Almirante Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, cerca de Ossory, Essex».

- ¡Bien! -exclamó el capitán cerrando la cartera-. La única dificultad que obstaculizaba nuestro camino ha quedado resuelta. ¡Paciencia, señor Vanstone, paciencia! Retomemos mis instrucciones en el punto en que las habíamos dejado. Présteme cinco minutos más de atención y verá el modo de casarse tan claramente como lo veo yo. Pasado mañana, manifiesta usted que está cansado de Aldborough y la señora Lecount sugiere St. Crux. No le diga que sí en seguida, se toma el día siguiente para pensarlo, y decide a última hora de la noche irse a St. Crux por la mañana temprano. ¿Tiene usted la costumbre de supervisar su equipaje, o suele depositar esa carga sobre los hombros de la señora Lecount?

- Lecount se ocupa de esa carga, por supuesto; ¡a Lecount le pago para eso! Pero no me iré en realidad, ¿no?

- Se irá lo más deprisa que le lleven los caballos a la estación de trenes sin haber mantenido ningún tipo de contacto con esta casa, ni en persona ni por carta. Deja usted aquí a la señora Lecount para que embale sus curiosidades, arregle cuentas con los comerciantes y le siga a St. Crux a la mañana siguiente. La mañana siguiente será la del décimo día. La mañana del décimo día recibirá la carta de Zurich, y sólo con que usted siga mis instrucciones, señor Vanstone, tan seguro como que está sentado aquí, ¡a Zurich se irá!

A Noel Vanstone empezó a subirle de nuevo el color al comprender por fin la estratagema del capitán.

- ¿Y qué hago yo en St. Crux? -preguntó.

- Esperar a que yo le llame -respondió el capitán-. Tan pronto como la señora Lecount emprenda el viaje, iré a la iglesia de aquí y haré la necesaria notificación de la boda. Ese mismo día, o al siguiente, viajaré hasta la dirección escrita en mi cartera, le recogeré a usted en casa del almirante y le llevaré a Londres para obtener la licencia. Con ese documento en nuestro poder, volveremos a Aldborough cuando la señora Lecount aún esté de camino a Zurich; ¡y antes de que emprenda el viaje de regreso, usted y mi sobrina serán marido y mujer! Tales son sus perspectivas de futuro. ¿Qué le parecen?

- ¡Qué cerebro tiene usted! -exclamó Noel Vanstone con un súbito arranque de entusiasmo-. Es usted el hombre más extraordinario que he conocido. Se diría que no ha

hecho otra cosa en la vida más que embaucar a la gente.

El capitán Wragge recibió este inconsciente tributo a su auténtico genio, con la complacencia de un hombre que se creía merecedor de él.

- Ya le dije, mi querido señor -comentó modestamente-, que yo nunca hago las cosas a medias. Perdóneme por recordarle que no tenemos tiempo para intercambiar cortesías. ¿Está completamente seguro de que ha comprendido las instrucciones? No me he atrevido a ponerlas en papel por temor a accidentes. Pruebe con el sistema de memoria artificial, cuente sus instrucciones con los dedos siguiéndome a mí. Hoy le dice a la señora Lecount que he intentado engañarle con las obras de arte de mi pariente. Mañana me niega el saludo en el paseo. Pasado mañana, se niega a salir, se ha cansado de Aldborough y permite a la señora Lecount que haga su sugerencia. Al día siguiente, acepta la sugerencia. Y al día siguiente de ése, se va usted a St. Crux. ¡Una vez más, mi querido señor! Pulgar: obras de arte, índice: me niega el saludo en el paseo. Corazón: cansado de Aldborough. Anular: sigue el consejo de la señora Lecount. Meñique: se va a St. Crux. No puede estar más claro ni ser más sencillo. ¿Hay algo que no comprenda, algo que pueda volver a explicarle antes de que se vaya?

- Sólo una cosa -dijo Noel Vanstone-. ¿Está decidido que yo no pueda volver aquí antes de irme a St. Crux?

- ¡Tajantemente! -respondió el capitán-. Todo el éxito de la empresa depende de que usted se mantenga alejado. La señora Lecount pondrá a prueba la credibilidad de todo lo que le diga, y la prueba será que usted se comunique o no con esta casa. ¡Le vigilará día y noche! No venga aquí, no mande mensajes, no escriba cartas, ni siquiera salga solo de casa. Deje que ella lo vea partir en dirección a St. Crux por sugerencia suya, con la absoluta certeza de que ha seguido su consejo sin comunicárnoslo de ninguna forma a mi sobrina o a mí. Si actúa así, ella tendrá que creerle basándose en la mejor prueba para nuestros intereses y la peor para los suyos: el testimonio de sus propios sentidos.

Tras estas últimas palabras de advertencia, el capitán estrechó cordialmente la mano del hombrecillo y lo envió a casa en el acto.

CAPÍTULO X

A su regreso a Sea-View, Noel Vanstone ejecutó con exactitud irreprochable las instrucciones que establecían su línea de conducta para el primero de los cinco días. La señora Lecount esbozó una leve sonrisa de desprecio mientras le contaba la historia de cómo el señor Bygrave había intentado hacer pasar por auténticos sus cuadros falsos, pero no se molestó en pronunciar ni una sola palabra cuando terminó. «¡Lo que yo decía! -pensó Noel Vanstone, observando el rostro de la señora Lecount con astucia-. ¡No se ha creído una sola palabra!»

Al día siguiente se produjo el encuentro en el paseo. El señor Bygrave alzó su sombrero y Noel Vanstone miró hacia otro lado. El capitán ejecutó el respingo de sorpresa y frunció el ceño, indignado, a la perfección, pero se hizo evidente que no habían conseguido convencer a la señora Lecount.

- Me temo señor, que hoy ha ofendido al señor Bygrave -comentó irónicamente-. ¡Por suerte para usted, es un excelente cristiano!, y me atrevo a predecir que mañana le habrá perdonado.

Noel Vanstone tuvo la sensatez de no comprometerse con una respuesta. Una vez más, aplaudió mentalmente su propia perspicacia; una vez más, triunfaba sobre su ingenioso amigo.

Hasta entonces las instrucciones habían sido demasiado claras y sencillas para que nadie pudiera equivocarse, pero ganaron en complejidad con el paso del tiempo, y el tercer día, Noel Vanstone se confundió y acabó cometiendo un leve error. Tras expresar el necesario hastío de Aldborough y el consiguiente deseo de cambiar de aires, el ama de llaves reaccionó (como él había predicho) recomendando inmediatamente una visita a St. Crux. Al dar su respuesta al consejo así ofrecido, Noel Vanstone cometió su primer error. En lugar de aplazar la decisión hasta el día siguiente, aceptó la sugerencia de la señora Lecount el día en que se la hacía.

Las consecuencias de este error no tuvieron demasiada trascendencia. Sencillamente el ama de llaves se dispuso a vigilar a su amo un día antes de lo que se había calculado, resultado para el que ya se había tomado la oportuna y previsora medida de prohibir a Noel Vanstone toda comunicación con North Shingles. Dudando, como había previsto el capitán Wragge, de la sinceridad del deseo de su amo de romper su relación con los Bygrave y marcharse a St. Crux, la señora Lecount probó la verdad o la falsedad de su impresión, aguardando, vigilante, el menor signo de comunicación secreta por una parte o por otra. La gran atención con que hasta entonces había observado las idas y venidas de North Shingles se trasladó enteramente a su amo. Durante el resto de ese tercer día, no lo perdió de vista ni un instante, ni permitió que nadie que tuviera intención de comunicarse con Noel Vanstone se quedara ni unos minutos a solas con él. A intervalos, durante toda la noche, la señora Lecount se acercaba a la puerta a hurtadillas, escuchaba y se cercioraba de que estuviera en la cama y, antes de que saliera el sol, a la mañana siguiente, el guardacostas que hacía sus rondas se sorprendió al ver a una señora levantada tan temprano como él y ocupada en su labor junto a una de las ventanas superiores de Sea-View.

La mañana del cuarto día, Noel Vanstone bajó a desayunar con la conciencia del error que había cometido la víspera. La conducta obvia con el fin de ganar tiempo era declarar que aún no se había decidido. Lo manifestó audazmente cuando el ama de llaves le preguntó si pensaba marcharse ese día. De nuevo la señora Lecount se abstuvo de hacer comentarios y de nuevo se mostraron signos de incredulidad en su rostro. La vacilación en los propósitos no era extraña en su experiencia de Noel Vanstone, pero en esta ocasión el ama de llaves creía que su caprichosa conducta era fingida con el fin de ganar tiempo para comunicarse con North Shingles y, por tanto, decidió mantenerse ojo avizor y espiarlo con vigilancia doblada y triplicada.

No llegó ninguna carta esa mañana. Hacia mediodía, el tiempo empeoró y abandonaron

la idea de salir a pasear como era su costumbre. Hora tras hora, mientras su amo se hallaba sentado en uno de los gabinetes, la señora Lecount vigilaba desde el otro con la puerta que daba al pasillo abierta y con una visión perfecta de North Shingles por una ventana lateral, junto a la cual se había apostado convenientemente. No se produjo el menor signo sospechoso ni llegó sonido sospechoso alguno a sus oídos. Al caer la tarde, su amo dejó de vacilar. Estaba asqueado del tiempo, detestaba el lugar, preveía el fastidio de más encuentros con el señor Bygrave y estaba resuelto a partir en dirección a St. Crux a primera hora de la mañana siguiente. Lecount podía quedarse para embalar las curiosidades y saldar las cuentas con los comerciantes, y seguirle a la residencia del almirante al día siguiente. El ama de llaves se asombró un tanto del tono y las maneras con que su amo le dio aquellas órdenes. Sabía con toda certeza que Noel Vanstone no se había comunicado en modo alguno con North Shingles y, sin embargo, parecía resuelto a abandonar Aldborough lo antes posible. Por primera vez vaciló su adhesión a sus propias conclusiones. Recordó que su amo se había quejado de los Bygrave antes de que éstos regresaran a Aldborough y comprendió que ya en aquella ocasión su propia incredulidad la había engañado, cuando apareció el carruaje en la puerta para demostrar que incluso el señor Bygrave cumplía con su palabra.

Aun así, la señora Lecount resolvió actuar con implacable prudencia hasta el final. Esa noche, cuando se cerraron las puertas, sacó las llaves de la puerta principal y la de la puerta de atrás. Luego abrió suavemente la ventana de su dormitorio y se sentó junto a ella con el sombrero y la capa puestos para no coger frío. La ventana de Noel Vanstone estaba en el mismo lado de la casa que la suya. Si se acercaba alguien para hablarle desde el jardín, el ama de llaves se enteraría de todo. Preparada en todos los aspectos para interceptar cualquier forma de comunicación clandestina que pudiera idear la estratagema, la señora Lecount montó guardia durante la tranquila noche. Cuando amaneció, bajó sigilosamente antes de que se levantara la criada, devolvió las llaves a su lugar y retomó su posición en el gabinete hasta que Noel Vanstone apareció en la mesa del desayuno. ¿Había cambiado de opinión? No. Rehusó viajar en posta hasta el ferrocarril, para ahorrarse el gasto, pero se mostró tan firme como antes en su resolución de irse a St. Crux. Deseaba que se le reservara un asiento interior en la primera diligencia. Suspicaz hasta el final, la señora Lecount envió al mozo del panadero para reservar el asiento. Siendo éste empleado de un servicio público, el señor Bygrave no sospecharía que se ocupaba de llevar a cabo un encargo privado.

El carruaje llegó a Sea-View. La señora Lecount vio a su amo instalarse en su asiento y comprobó que los otros tres asientos interiores estaban ocupados por desconocidos. Preguntó al cochero si los asientos exteriores (que no estaban ocupados) se habían reservado ya. El hombre respondió afirmativamente. Tenía que recoger a dos caballeros en el pueblo y los otros ocuparían su sitio en la posada. La señora Lecount dirigió inmediatamente sus pasos hacia la posada y se situó en el paseo frente a la puerta, desde donde podía ver la diligencia partir definitivamente. Diez minutos después se alejaba traqueteando, llena de pasajeros, tanto en los asientos interiores como exteriores, y el ama de llaves se aseguró con sus propios ojos de que ni el señor Bygrave ni cualquier otra persona de North Shingles se hallaba entre ellos.

Sólo le quedaba una precaución más por tomar y no la descuidó. Sin duda el señor Bygrave había visto la diligencia frente a Sea-View. Podía alquilar un carruaje y seguirla hasta el ferrocarril por mera especulación. La señora Lecount permaneció a la vista de la posada (el único lugar en el que podía conseguirse un carruaje) durante una hora más, esperando acontecimientos. No ocurrió nada, no apareció ningún carruaje, ya no era humanamente posible perseguir a Noel Vanstone. La larga tensión a que había estado sometido el intelecto de la señora Lecount aflojó por fin. Abandonó su vigilancia en el paseo y regresó más animada de lo habitual con el fin de cumplimentar los requisitos necesarios para cerrar la casa de Sea-View.

Se sentó sola en el gabinete y suspiró profundamente con alivio. El capitán Wragge no se había engañado en sus cálculos. El testimonio de sus propios sentidos había vencido por fin la incredulidad del ama de llaves y la había obligado literalmente a ir al extremo opuesto de la convicción.

Juzgó los acontecimientos de los tres últimos días por su propia experiencia y, sabiendo

(como sabía con toda certeza) que la idea de ir a St. Crux había sido suya y que su amo no había tenido oportunidad ni había mostrado deseos de informar a la familia de North Shingles de que había aceptado su propuesta, la señora Lecount se vio obligada a admitir que no le quedaban fundamentos para justificar que continuara recelando una traición. Repasó la sucesión de circunstancias a la nueva luz arrojada por los resultados y no halló nada extraño ni contradictorio en ninguna parte. El intento de hacer pasar los cuadros falsos por originales estaba en perfecta armonía con el carácter de un hombre como el señor Bygrave. La indignación de su amo al sentirse engañado; la sospecha, expresada claramente, de que la señorita Bygrave era cómplice; el desengaño sufrido con la sobrina, el trato despreciativo que había dado al tío en el paseo; el hastío del lugar que había sido escenario de su imprudente y precipitada intimidad con desconocidos; su prisa por abandonarlo aquella misma mañana; todos aparecían como hechos ciertos, por razones suficientes, a los ojos del ama de llaves. Había visto con sus propios ojos a Noel Vanstone marchándose de Aldborough sin dejar ni intentar dejar una sola pista que los Bygrave pudieran seguir.

Hasta ahí la llevaron sus conclusiones, pero no más lejos. Era una mujer demasiado sagaz para confiar el futuro al azar y la fortuna. El carácter veleidoso de su amo podía ablandarse. Algún hecho accidental podía, en cualquier momento, dar oportunidad al señor Bygrave de enmendar el error cometido y recuperar con malas artes el lugar perdido en la estima de Noel Vanstone. Aun admitiendo que las circunstancias se habían manifestado al fin inequívocamente en su favor, no por ello se hallaba la señora Lecount menos convencida de que nada garantizaría de forma permanente la seguridad de su amo en el futuro más que poner al descubierto la conspiración, cosa que ella se había esforzado en lograr desde el principio y aún estaba resuelta a hacer.

«Siempre disfruto en St. Crux» -pensó la señora Lecount abriendo sus libros de cuentas y clasificando las facturas de los comerciantes-. El almirante es un caballero, la casa es noble, la mesa excelente. ¡No importa! Me quedaré aquí, en Sea-View, yo sola hasta que haya visto el interior del guardarropa de la señorita Bygrave.»

Embaló la colección de curiosidades de su amo en diferentes cajas, pagó lo que se adeudaba a los comerciantes y supervisó la tarea de cubrir los muebles en el curso del día. Hacia el anochecer salió de la casa con intención de investigar y se aventuró en el jardín de North Shingles bajo la protección de la oscuridad. Vio luz en la ventana de la salita y las luces en las ventanas superiores, como de costumbre. Tras unos instantes de vacilación se acercó furtivamente a la puerta principal y probó el pomo sin hacer ruido. El pomo giró, como esperaba por la experiencia que tenía de las casas de Aldborough y de otras estaciones balnearias, pero la puerta se resistió; la desconfianza de sus habitantes les había llevado a echar el cerrojo. Después de este descubrimiento, la señora Lecount rodeó la casa hasta la parte de atrás y comprobó que la puerta de ese lado estaba cerrada de la misma manera.

- Eche el cerrojo cuanto quiera, señor Bygrave -dijo el ama de llaves, volviendo sigilosamente al paseo-. No podrá echárselo al bolsillo de su criada. La mejor cerradura que tenga se abre con una llave de oro.

La señora Lecount se acostó. La vigilancia y la excitación constantes de los dos últimos días la habían agotado.

A la mañana siguiente se levantó a las siete. Media hora después vio al puntual señor Bygrave -como lo había visto muchas otras veces a la misma hora- salir por la verja de North Shingles con sus toallas bajo el brazo y dirigirse hacia una barca que le aguardaba en la playa. La natación era uno de los muchos talentos personales que el capitán dominaba a la perfección. Cada mañana lo llevaban remando en barca hasta mar abierta, donde se daba su placentero baño en las profundas aguas azules. La señora Lecount había calculado ya por su reloj el tiempo que consumía en aquel esparcimiento y había descubierto que solía transcurrir una hora entera desde el momento en que embarcaba en la playa hasta el momento en que regresaba.

Durante este intervalo, jamás había visto a ningún otro habitante de North Shingles abandonar la casa. Sin duda la criada se hallaba atareada en la cocina, seguramente la

señora Wragge seguía acostada, y quizá la señorita Bygrave (si se levantaba tan temprano) había recibido instrucciones de no aventurarse fuera de la casa en ausencia de su tío. Hacía días que la dificultad de superar el obstáculo de la presencia de Magdalen en la casa había sido la única que el ingenio de la señora Lecount no había conseguido resolver, hasta entonces.

Se sentó junto a la ventana durante un cuarto de hora después de que la barca del capitán abandonara la playa, esforzando al máximo los engranajes de su cerebro y con la vista maquinalmente fija en North Shingles. Meditaba la carta que podía enviar a su amo excusando el retraso de su partida de Aldborough unos cuantos días cuando la puerta de la casa que observaba se abrió de repente y Magdalen en persona salió al jardín. Su figura y su vestido eran inconfundibles. Dio unos cuantos pasos rápidos hacia la verja, se detuvo y se echó el velo de la pamela sobre la cara, como si la clara luz de la mañana fuera demasiado intensa para ella; luego siguió presurosa hasta el paseo y se alejó en dirección al norte con una prisa tal o tan ensimismada en sus preocupaciones que no cerró la verja del jardín después de cruzarla.

La señora Lecount se levantó de su silla, dudando por un momento de lo que veían sus ojos. ¿De verdad se le ofrecía espontáneamente la oportunidad que había intentado conseguir en vano con maquinaciones? ¿Por fin le favorecía la fortuna después de haberle sido hostil durante tanto tiempo? No cabía la menor duda, como dice la expresión popular, «su suerte había cambiado». Cogió sombrero y mantilla y se dirigió a North Shingles sin pensarlo un minuto más. El señor Bygrave en el mar; la señorita Bygrave de paseo; la señora Bygrave y la criada en casa, ambas fáciles de manejar; no podía perder semejante oportunidad; ¡bien valía la pena correr el riesgo!

Esta vez la puerta principal se abrió fácilmente; nadie había echado el cerrojo tras salir Magdalen. La señora Lecount cerró la puerta con suavidad, escuchó un momento en el pasillo y oyó el estrépito de la criada atareada en la cocina con sus ollas y cacerolas. «Si mi buena estrella me guía directamente a la habitación de la señorita Bygrave -pensó el ama de llaves subiendo sigilosamente por las escaleras-, puede que encuentre su guardarropa sin molestar a nadie.»

Al llegar al descansillo probó la puerta más cercana a mano derecha. La suerte caprichosa ya la había abandonado. Estaba cerrada. Probó la puerta de enfrente, a mano izquierda. Las botas dispuestas simétricamente en una hilera y las navajas sobre el tocador le hicieron ver de inmediato que aún no había hallado la habitación correcta. Volvió a la parte derecha, caminó por el pasillo que conducía a la parte posterior de la casa y probó una tercera puerta. La puerta se abrió y los dos extremos opuestos de la humanidad femenina, la señora Wragge y la señora Lecount, ¡se hallaron cara a cara!

- ¡Le pido mil perdones! -dijo la señora Lecount con una consumada sangre fría.

- ¡Que el Señor nos bendiga y nos guarde! -exclamó la señora Wragge con un asombro mayúsculo.

Las dos exclamaciones se profirieron en un momento, cosa que aprovechó la señora Lecount para tomarle las medidas a su víctima. No se le escapó ni el más mínimo detalle. Se fijó en el traje de cachemira oriental que yacía sobre la mesa medio hecho y medio descosido; se fijó en el pie imbécil de la señora Wragge buscando a ciegas el zapato perdido en las cercanías de la silla; se fijó en que había una segunda puerta en la habitación, además de la que ella había utilizado, y una segunda silla a su alcance en la que quizá fuera mejor que se sentara con aire íntimo y amistoso.

- Por favor, no se ofenda por esta intromisión -rogó la señora Lecount sentándose en la silla-. ¡Por favor, permítame que me explique!

Hablando con su tono más suave, examinando a la señora Wragge con una dulce sonrisa en sus labios zalameros y un interés enternecedor en sus hermosos ojos negros, el ama de llaves soltó su retahíla preliminar de falsedades con tal aire de sinceridad natural que el padre de todas las mentiras lo hubiera envidiado. El señor Bygrave le había dicho que la señora Wragge era una enferma; ella se había reprochado una y otra vez, en sus

ratos de ocio en Sea-View (donde se hallaba empleada como ama de llaves del señor Noel Vanstone), no haber ofrecido sus amables servicios a la señora Bygrave; había recibido instrucciones de su amo (al que sin duda la señora Bygrave conocía bien como uno de los amigos de su marido y, naturalmente, como uno de los admiradores de su encantadora sobrina) para que se reuniera con él ese mismo día en la residencia a la que se había trasladado desde Aldborough; pronto habría de partir, pero no tendría la conciencia tranquila si se hubiera marchado sin visitar North Shingles para disculparse por su aparente falta de consideración y de buena vecindad; no había hallado a nadie en la casa, no había podido hacerse oír por la criada; había supuesto (al no descubrir tal aposento en la planta baja) que el gabinete de la señora Bygrave podía estar arriba; irreflexivamente había cometido una intrusión de la que se avergonzaba con toda sinceridad, y únicamente podía esperar de la indulgencia de la señora Bygrave que la excusara y perdonara.

Una disculpa menos recargada hubiera sido igualmente útil al propósito de la señora Lecount. Tan pronto como las esforzadas percepciones de la señora Wragge comprendieron el hecho de que su inesperada visitante era una vecina que conocía bien por el nombre, todo su ser quedó transido de admiración por los distinguidos modales de la señora Lecount, ¡y el vestido que le sentaba como un guante! «Qué manera de hablar tan magnífica -pensó la pobre señora Wragge cuando el ama de llaves llegaba a su última frase-. ¡Y, oh Dios bendito, qué bien vestida va!»

- Veo que la molesto -prosiguió la señora Lecount, valiéndose del traje de cachemira oriental como un medio a su alcance para alcanzar su objetivo-. Veo que la molesto, señora, cuando está ocupada en una tarea que, lo sé por experiencia, exige la mayor atención. ¡Dios mío, Dios mío, veo que lo está descosiendo después de tenerlo hecho! Le hablo por experiencia otra vez, señora Bygrave. ¡Algunos vestidos son muy obstinados! Algunos vestidos parecen decirle a una, literalmente: «¡No! ¡Puedes hacerme lo que quieras, no quedaré bien!».

La señora Wragge quedó muy impresionada por este afortunado comentario. Estalló en risas y batió palmas con sus manazas como muestra de sincera aprobación.

- Eso es lo que me ha estado diciendo este vestido desde que metí las tijeras en él por primera vez -exclamó alegremente-. Sé que tengo las espaldas anchísimas, pero ésa no es razón. ¿Por qué un vestido que has tenido entre las manos durante semanas no habría de querer luego ajustarse a ti? Me cuelga sobre el pecho como un saco, eso es. Fíjese, señora, mire la falda. No quiere salir bien. Por delante arrastra y por detrás se levanta. ¡Me deja los talones al descubierto, y Dios sabe que ya tengo bastantes líos con mis talones para además enseñarlos!

- ¿Puedo pedirle un favor? -preguntó la señora Lecount en tono de confidencia-. ¿Me permite que intente, señora Bygrave, que mi experiencia le sea de utilidad? Creo que las pecheras son nuestra gran dificultad, señora. Bien, ¿y esta pechera suya? ¿Le digo con sinceridad lo que pienso? ¡Esta pechera suya es una gran equivocación!

- ¡No diga eso! -imploró la señora Wragge-. ¡No, por favor, sea buena! Es terriblemente grande, ya lo sé, pero la he copiado de uno de los vestidos de Magdalen.

La señora Wragge estaba demasiado absorta en el tema del vestido para darse cuenta de que se había ido de la lengua y de que se había referido a Magdalen por su auténtico nombre. El agudo oído de la señora Lecount detectó el error al instante mismo en que se cometió. «¡Vaya, vaya! -pensó-. Ya he descubierto algo. Por si alguna vez había dudado de mis sospechas, aquí tengo a una inestimable señora que me las acaba de confirmar.»

- Discúlpeme -prosiguió en voz alta-, ¿ha dicho usted que lo ha copiado de uno de los vestidos de su sobrina?

- Sí -dijo la señora Wragge-. Son tan iguales como dos guisantes.

- Entonces -dijo la señora Lecount hábilmente-, debe de haber algún serio error en la

confección del vestido de su sobrina. ¿Podría mostrármelo?

- ¡Bendita sea, sí! -exclamó la señora Wragge-. Venga por aquí, señora, y traiga el vestido con usted, por favor. Si se deja encima de la mesa, se desliza siempre hasta el suelo sólo para ofenderme. Aquí, encima de la cama, hay mucho sitio.

Abrió la puerta que comunicaba los dos dormitorios y entró con impaciencia en el de Magdalen. La señora Lecount siguió echando miradas furtivas a su reloj. ¡Nunca había volado el tiempo como aquella mañana! Veinte minutos más y el señor Bygrave volvería del baño.

- ¡Aquí está! -dijo la señora Wragge, abriendo el armario para sacar un vestido de una de las perchas-. ¡Mire esto! Esta pechera tiene frunces y también la mía. Seis en una y media docena en la otra, y los míos son los más grandes, ¡eso es todo!

La señora Lecount meneó la cabeza con gravedad y entró inmediatamente en sutiles disquisiciones sobre el arte de la costura, que tuvieron el efecto deseado de desconcertar por completo a la propietaria del traje de cachemira oriental en menos de tres minutos.

- ¡Basta! -imploró la señora Wragge-. ¡No siga! Me he quedado a kilómetros de usted y la cabeza ha empezado a zumbarme. Díganos, como un alma de Dios, qué debo hacer. Acaba de decir algo sobre los patrones. ¿Quizá soy demasiado grande para el patrón? Si es así, no puedo evitarlo. ¡Mis buenos llantos tuve cuando era una jovencita en edad de crecer por culpa de mi tamaño! La mitad de mí sobra, señora; mídame a lo largo o mídame a lo ancho, no lo niego, la mitad de mí sobra de todas las maneras.

- Mi querida señora -protestó la señora Lecount-. ¡Es usted injusta consigo misma! Permítame asegurarle que posee usted una figura que impone, la figura de Minerva. Una majestuosa simplicidad en la forma de una mujer exige necesariamente una simplicidad majestuosa en la forma de su vestido. Las leyes del vestir son clásicas; ¡no se puede jugar con las leyes del vestir! Frunces para Venus, bullones para Juno, pliegues para Minerva. Yo sugeriría un cambio radical de patrón. Su sobrina tiene otros vestidos en su colección. ¿Por qué no probamos a encontrar un patrón de Minerva entre ellos?

Mientras pronunciaba estas palabras, se dirigió de nuevo al armario.

La señora Wragge la siguió y sacó los vestidos, uno por uno, meneando la cabeza con desánimo. Aparecieron vestidos de seda y vestidos de muselina. El único vestido que permaneció invisible fue el que buscaba la señora Lecount.

- Hay muchos -dijo la señora Wragge-. Puede que sirvan para Venus y para esas otras dos (las he visto en cuadros sin un solo pedazo de ropa decente entre las tres), pero no servirán para mí.

- ¿No queda ahí otro vestido? -preguntó la señora Lecount, señalando el interior del armario, pero sin tocar nada-. ¿No veo algo colgado en el rincón detrás de ese chal oscuro?

La señora Wragge sacó el chal; la señora Lecount abrió un poco más la puerta del armario. Allí, enganchado de cualquier manera a la percha más escondida, ¡allí, con sus lunares blancos y su doble volante, se hallaba el vestido de alpaca marrón!

Lo repentino y consumado del descubrimiento cogió al ama de llaves totalmente desprevenida, pese a ser una experta del disimulo. Dio un respingo al ver el vestido. Segundos después miró a la señora Wragge con inquietud. ¿Había sido observado el respingo? Había pasado totalmente inadvertido. La señora Wragge dedicaba toda su atención al vestido de alpaca: lo contemplaba fijamente de manera incomprensible y con la mayor consternación.

- Parece usted alarmada, señora -dijo la señora Lecount-. ¿Qué hay en el armario que la asuste tanto?

- Hubiera dado una corona de mi propio bolsillo -dijo la señora Wragge-, por no haber visto ese vestido. Se me había borrado de la memoria y ahora ha vuelto otra vez. ¡Tápelo! -exclamó la señora Wragge, arrojando el chal sobre el vestido en un súbito ataque de desesperación-. ¡Si sigo viéndolo mucho tiempo, creeré haber vuelto a Vauxhall Walk!

¡Vauxhall Walk! Aquellas dos palabras dijeron a la señora Lecount que estaba a punto de dar con un nuevo hallazgo. Echó una segunda mirada furtiva a su reloj. Apenas le quedaban diez minutos antes de que regresara el señor Bygrave; su sobrina podía volver en cualquiera de esos minutos.

La cautela aconsejó a la señora Lecount marcharse sin correr más riesgos. La curiosidad la clavó en el sitio y le dio el valor para quedarse costara lo que costara hasta agotar el tiempo. Su afable sonrisa empezó a endurecerse un poco cuando tanteó con cuidado en el interior de la débil cabeza de la señora Wragge.

- ¿Tiene usted algún recuerdo desagradable de Vauxhall Walk? -preguntó con el tono inquisitivo más amable posible-. ¿O quizá, debería decir, algún recuerdo desagradable de ese vestido que pertenece a su sobrina?

- La última vez que la vi con ese vestido puesto -dijo la señora Wragge, desplomándose en una silla y empezando a temblar- fue el día en que volví de comprar y vi al fantasma.

- ¡El fantasma! -repitió la señora Lecount, juntando las manos con cortés asombro-. ¡Querida señora, perdóneme! ¿Existe tal cosa en el mundo? ¿Dónde lo vio? ¿En Vauxhall Walk? Cuénteme. Es usted la primera señora que conozco que haya visto a un fantasma. ¡Cuénteme, se lo ruego!

Halagada por la importancia que había cobrado de repente a los ojos del ama de llaves, la señora Wragge inició con todo detalle el relato de su aventura sobrenatural. La intensa avidez con que la señora Lecount escuchó su descripción de la vestimenta del espectro, la prisa del espectro por subir las escaleras y la desaparición del espectro en el dormitorio; el extraordinario interés que mostró la señora Lecount al oír que el vestido del guardarropa era el mismo que casualmente llevaba puesto Magdalen en el horrísono momento en que el fantasma se desvaneció... animaron a la señora Wragge a añadir más y más detalles y a embrollarse en circunstancias paralelas, de las cuales no parecía que fuera a emerger en varias horas. Los minutos volaban cada vez más deprisa; cada vez estaba más cerca el momento fatídico del regreso del señor Bygrave. La señora Lecount miró su reloj por tercera vez sin intentar, en esta ocasión, ocultar sus movimientos a la mirada de su compañera. Tenía dos minutos exactos para salir de North Shingles. Dos minutos bastarían, si no se producía ningún incidente. Había descubierto el vestido de alpaca, había oído toda la historia de la aventura en Vauxhall Walk y, mejor aún, se había enterado incluso del número de la casa, que la señora Wragge recordaba casualmente porque era el mismo número en años que correspondía a su edad. Había conseguido cuanto necesitaba para abrir los ojos a su amo. Aunque hubiera podido quedarse más tiempo, no había nada más que valiera la pena. «Voy a dejar muda a esta auténtica idiota con un golpe de gracia -pensó el ama de llaves-, y desapareceré antes de que se recobre.»

- ¡Horrible! -exclamó la señora Lecount, interrumpiendo el relato fantasmal con un breve y agudo chillido, y dirigiéndose hacia la puerta sin la menor ceremonia ante el asombro indescriptible de la señora Wragge-. Me ha helado la sangre. ¡Buenos días! - Con todo el descaro, arrojó el traje de cachemira oriental en el ancho regazo de la señora Wragge y abandonó la habitación al instante.

Bajaba las escaleras a toda prisa, cuando oyó que se abría la puerta del dormitorio.

- ¿Dónde están sus modales? -gritó una voz desde arriba que la increpaba débilmente por encima de la barandilla-. ¿Qué pretende tirándome encima el vestido de esa manera? ¡Debería avergonzarse de sí misma! -añadió la señora Wragge, pasando de cordera a leona al darse cuenta paulatinamente de la afrenta cometida contra el traje de cachemira-. ¡Extranjera repugnante, debería avergonzarse de sí misma!

Perseguida por este discurso de despedida, la señora Lecount llegó a la puerta principal y la abrió sin detenerse. Rápidamente recorrió el sendero del jardín, cruzó la verja y, hallándose a salvo en el paseo, se detuvo y miró hacia el mar.

El primer objeto con que tropezaron sus ojos fue la figura del capitán Bygrave, inmóvil en la playa: ¡un petrificado bañista con las toallas en la mano! A la señora Lecount le bastó con echarle una ojeada para comprender que la había visto salir por la verja de su jardín.

La señora Lecount conjeturó acertadamente que el primer impulso del señor Bygrave le conduciría a realizar averiguaciones inmediatas en su propia casa, de modo que caminó hacia Sea-View tan tranquilamente como si no hubiera sucedido nada. Cuando entró en el gabinete donde le aguardaba su solitario desayuno, se sorprendió de ver una carta sobre la mesa. Se acercó para cogerla con una expresión de impaciencia, pensando que sería la factura de algún comerciante que había olvidado.

Era la carta falsificada de Zurich.

CAPÍTULO XI

El matasellos y la letra del sobre (admirablemente imitada) advirtieron a la señora Lecount del contenido de la carta antes de abrirla. Tras aguardar un momento para serenarse, leyó el anuncio de la recaída de su hermano.

No había nada en la letra, ni expresión en parte alguna de la carta que arrojaran la más leve sombra de sospecha de que se trataba de juego sucio.

No le cupo ni la más pequeña duda de que la carta en la que se solicitaba su presencia junto al lecho de su hermano fuera auténtica. La mano que sostenía la carta cayó pesadamente sobre el regazo; el ama de llaves se volvió vieja, macilenta y ojerosa en un momento. Pensamientos muy alejados de sus objetivos e intereses del presente, recuerdos que la devolvieron a otros países que no eran Inglaterra y otros tiempos que no eran los que había pasado como ama de llaves alargaron sus sombras interiores hasta la superficie y dejaron oscuras huellas de su misteriosa transición en el rostro de la señora Lecount. Los minutos se sucedieron y en la cocina la criada aguardaba en vano que sonara la campanilla del gabinete. Los minutos se sucedieron y ella seguía sentada inmóvil, sin lágrimas, muerta para el presente y el futuro, viviendo en el pasado.

La llegada de la criada, sin que la hubiera llamado, la despertó. Con un hondo suspiro, la fría y reservada mujer dobló de nuevo la carta y se dispuso a ocuparse de los intereses y deberes del momento.

Decidió la cuestión de ir o no ir a Zurich tras una brevísima reflexión. Antes de que hubiera acercado la silla a la mesa del desayuno, había resuelto ir.

Pese a que la estratagema del capitán Wragge había funcionado admirablemente bien, podría haber fracasado de no haber sido por lo ocurrido esa mañana. El preciso accidente del que el capitán se había preocupado tanto en protegerse -el accidente que acababa de producirse pese a sus esfuerzos- era, de todos los sucesos que podían haber acaecido, el único que refutó todo cálculo previo, ¡favoreciendo directamente el propósito principal de la conspiración! Si la señora Lecount no hubiera obtenido la información que buscaba antes de recibir la carta desde Zurich, esa carta podría haberse dirigido a ella infructuosamente. Hubiera vacilado antes de abandonar Inglaterra, y esa vacilación podría haber sido fatal para la estrategia del capitán.

En todo caso, con las pruebas palpables en su poder: con el vestido descubierto en el armario de Magdalen, con el trozo cortado en su bolsillo, y con el conocimiento, obtenido por la señora Wragge, de la casa misma en la que se lo había puesto, la señora Lecount tenía ahora el medio de advertir a Noel Vanstone como antes no había podido o, en otras palabras, el medio de protegerle de cualquier tendencia peligrosa hacia la reconciliación con los Bygrave, que de lo contrario podía haberle acechado durante su ausencia en Zurich. La única dificultad que la tenía desconcertada era la de decidir si debía comunicarse con su amo personalmente o por carta antes de abandonar Inglaterra.

Miró de nuevo la carta del médico. Las palabras «sin dilación» en la frase que exigía su presencia junto al hermano moribundo estaban subrayadas dos veces. La casa del almirante Bartam estaba a cierta distancia del ferrocarril; el tiempo empleado en ir a St. Crux y volver podía ser tiempo desafortunadamente empleado a costa del viaje a Zurich. Aunque hubiera preferido infinitamente una entrevista personal con Noel Vanstone, no le quedaba más remedio, en un asunto de vida o muerte, que salvar un tiempo precioso escribiéndole una carta.

Tras enviar a alguien a reservar un asiento en la primera diligencia, se sentó a escribir a su amo.

Su primer pensamiento fue contarle todo lo ocurrido en North Shingles aquella mañana.

Sin embargo, rechazó la idea después de reflexionar. En otra ocasión había confiado ya sus armas en las manos de su amo (al copiar la descripción personal de la carta de la señorita Garth) y el señor Bygrave se las había arreglado para volverlas contra ella. Esta vez decidió guardarlas en su poder. El secreto del fragmento que faltaba en el vestido de alpaca no lo conocía otra criatura viviente más que ella y estaba resuelta a guardarlo hasta su regreso a Inglaterra. Podía producir la impresión necesaria en el espíritu de Noel Vanstone sin adentrarse en detalles. Conocía, por experiencia, la clase de carta que podía confiar que produjera efecto sobre él y la escribió con las palabras siguientes:

Querido señor Noel:

Me han llegado tristes noticias desde Zurich. Mi querido hermano se muere y su médico me llama a su lado sin dilación. La urgente necesidad de tomar el primer medio de transporte que salga hacia el Continente no me deja otra alternativa. Debo aprovechar el permiso para abandonar Inglaterra que, de ser necesario, me otorgó usted amablemente al declararse la enfermedad de mi hermano y debo, para evitar toda demora, marcharme primero a Londres en lugar de ir a verle a usted a St. Crux, como me hubiera gustado.

Pese a estar dolorosamente afectada por la desgracia familiar que ha caído sobre mí, no puedo dejar pasar esta oportunidad sin hacer alusión a otro asunto que afecta seriamente a su bienestar y en el que (por ese motivo) su vieja ama de llaves tiene el mayor interés.

Voy a sorprenderle y escandalizarle, señor Noel. ¡No se altere, se lo ruego! ¡Intente dominarse!

El descarado intento de engañarle que felizmente abrió sus ojos al auténtico carácter de nuestros vecinos de North Shingles no fue el único propósito que tenía el señor Bygrave al imponerle su amistad. La infame conspiración con la que fue usted amenazado en Londres ha seguido su curso, bajo la dirección del señor Bygrave, en Aldborough. Un accidente -le diré qué accidente cuando volvamos a vernos- ha puesto a mi alcance una información preciosa para su seguridad futura. He descubierto con absoluta certeza que la persona que se hace llamar señorita Bygrave no es otra que la mujer que nos visitó disfrazada en Vauxhall Walk.

Yo lo sospechaba desde el principio, pero no tenía pruebas que sustentaran mis sospechas; no tenía medios para combatir la falsa impresión que se había producido en usted. Mis manos, gracias a Dios, ya no están atadas. Poseo una prueba irrefutable de la afirmación que acabo de hacer; prueba que podrá ver con sus propios ojos; prueba que le satisfaría aunque fuera usted un juez en un tribunal de Justicia.

Quizá, incluso así, señor Noel, ¿se negará usted a creerme? Bien. Me crea o no, tengo que pedirle un último favor que su sentido inglés del juego limpio no me negará.

Este triste viaje que voy a emprender me mantendrá alejada de Inglaterra durante una quincena o tres semanas como mucho. Me hará usted el favor -y desde luego no sacrificará usted su propio placer y conveniencia- de permanecer durante todo ese tiempo con sus amigos en St. Crux. Si antes de mi regreso alguna inesperada circunstancia le pone a usted en situación de ver de nuevo a los Bygrave, y si la natural bondad de su corazón le inclina a aceptar las excusas que en ese caso sin duda le dirigirán, impóngase una pequeña reserva por su propio bien, que no por el mío. Suspenda su coqueteo con la señorita (¡ruego a todas las demás señoritas que me perdonen por llamarla así!) hasta mi regreso. Si, cuando yo regrese, no consigo demostrar que la señorita Bygrave es la mujer que llevaba aquel disfraz y pronunció aquellas palabras de amenaza en Vauxhall Walk, me comprometo a abandonar su servicio ese mismo día, y expiaré el pecado de levantar falsos testimonios contra el prójimo renunciando a todos mis derechos a su agradecido recuerdo, tanto en el nombre de su padre como en el suyo propio. Me comprometo así sin reservas de ningún

tipo y le prometo cumplirlo -si fracasa mi prueba- por la fe de una buena católica y la palabra de una mujer honrada. Su leal servidora,

VlRGINIE LECOUNT

Las últimas frases de esta carta -como muy bien sabía el ama de llaves cuando las escribió- expresaban la única apelación que sin la menor duda produciría sobre Noel Vanstone un efecto profundo y duradero. La señora Lecount podía haber empeñado su palabra, su vida o su reputación para demostrar la afirmación que había hecho, y no habría conseguido producir en él una impresión permanente. Pero al empeñar, no sólo el empleo a su servicio, sino también sus reivindicaciones pecuniarias, amortiguaba de inmediato la pasión dominante de su vida en espera del resultado. No cabía la menor duda; en beneficio del que era el mayor interés de su vida -el de conservar su dinero-, esperaría.

«¡Jaque mate para el señor Bygrave! -pensó la señora Lecount mientras sellaba la carta y escribía la dirección-. La batalla ha concluido; ha terminado la partida.»

Mientras la señora Lecount se ocupaba de la seguridad futura de su amo en Sea-View, los acontecimientos se precipitaban en North Shingles.

Tan pronto como el capitán Wragge se recobró de su asombro ante la aparición del ama de llaves en su propio jardín, se apresuró a entrar en la casa y, guiado por sus propios presentimientos sobre el desastre acaecido, subió directamente a la habitación de su mujer.

Jamás había sentido la pobre señora Wragge todo el peso de la indignación del capitán como lo sintió en aquel momento. La poca inteligencia natural que poseía se desvaneció de inmediato en el torbellino de ira de su marido. Los únicos hechos claros que pudo extraer de su mujer fueron dos. En primer lugar, la imprudente deserción de Magdalen de su puesto resultó no tener mejor excusa que su incorregible impaciencia: no había dormido por la noche, se había levantado con fiebre, sintiéndose fatal, y había salido sin pensar en las consecuencias con la intención de procurarse el alivio del aire fresco, pues le ardía la cabeza. En segundo lugar, la señora Wragge había visto a la señora Lecount, según su propia confesión, había hablado con ella y había acabado contándole la historia del fantasma. Tras hacer estos descubrimientos, el capitán Wragge no perdió más tiempo luchando con el terror y la confusión de su mujer. Se retiró en el acto a una ventana desde la que se dominaba la casa de Noel Vanstone y allí se apostó para vigilar a la espera de nuevos acontecimientos en Sea-View, tal como se había apostado la señora Lecount para vigilar a la espera de acontecimientos en North Shingles.

Ni una palabra sobre el desastre de la mañana escapó de sus labios cuando Magdalen regresó y lo encontró en su puesto de vigilancia. El torrente de palabras del capitán Wragge parecía haberse secado por fin.

- Le advertí lo que haría la señora Wragge -dijo-, y la señora Wragge lo ha hecho. -Siguió sentado, impávido, junto a la ventana, con una paciencia que ni siquiera la señora Lecount hubiera podido superar. La única medida activa que al parecer consideraba necesaria, la tomó a través de otra persona. Envió a la criada a la posada para alquilar un tílburi y un caballo rápido y para decir que pasaría él en persona antes del mediodía para comunicarle al posadero cuándo necesitaría el vehículo. No le traicionó un solo gesto de impaciencia hasta que se acercó la hora de salida de la primera diligencia. Entonces los sinuosos labios del capitán empezaron a contraerse con nerviosismo, y los inquietos dedos del capitán tamborilearon sin cesar sobre el cristal de la ventana.

La diligencia apareció por fin y se detuvo frente a Sea-View. Un minuto después, el propio capitán Wragge observó que entre los pasajeros que abandonaban Aldborough aquella mañana se encontraba la señora Lecount.

Una vez disipada la principal incertidumbre, quedaba por resolver una grave cuestión, a tenor de los sucesos de la mañana. ¿Cuál era el destino final del viaje de la señora Lecount, Zurich o St. Crux? Que informaría a su amo sobre la historia del fantasma de la señora Wragge y el resto de sus hallazgos en relación con nombres y lugares que pudiera haber mencionado la señora Wragge estaba fuera de toda duda. Pero de los dos medios a su disposición para causar el daño -bien en persona, bien por carta- para el capitán era de vital importancia saber cuál había elegido. Si se iba a casa del almirante, a él no le quedaría más remedio que seguir la diligencia, coger el tren en el que viajara la señora Lecount y adelantarse a ella después, en el trayecto desde la estación de Essex hasta St. Crux. Si, por el contrario, el ama de llaves se había contentado con escribir a su amo, sólo sería necesario idear el modo de interceptar la carta. El capitán decidió ir a la oficina de correos en primer lugar. Suponiendo que la señora Lecount hubiera escrito una carta, no la habría dejado a merced de la criada, se habría encargado de echarla al buzón personalmente antes de abandonar Aldborough.

- Buenos días -dijo el capitán, dirigiéndose animadamente al administrador de correos-. Soy el señor Bygrave de North Shingles. Creo que tiene usted una carta en el buzón dirigida al señor...

El administrador de Correos era un hombre bajo y, por consiguiente, un hombre con una idea propia de su importancia. Con gesto solemne detuvo al capitán en plena carrera.

- Una vez se ha echado una carta, señor -dijo-, ninguna persona ajena a Correos puede tocarla hasta que llegue a su destino.

El capitán no era hombre que se dejara intimidar, ni siquiera por un administrador de Correos. Se le ocurrió una idea brillante. Sacó la cartera, en la que tenía escrita la dirección del almirante Bartram, y volvió a la carga.

- Suponga que se haya escrito mal la dirección por equivocación -empezó-. Y suponga que el remitente desea corregir el error después de haber echado la carta al buzón.

- Una vez se ha echado la carta, señor -reiteró la impenetrable autoridad local-, nadie ajeno a la oficina puede tocarla con excusa alguna.

- Lo admito de todo corazón -insistió el capitán-. Yo no quiero tocarla, sólo quiero explicarme. Una señora ha echado una carta en el buzón dirigida al «Señor Noel Vanstone, residencia del almirante Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex». Tenía mucha prisa y no está segura de si ha añadido el nombre de la localidad más cercana con oficina de correos, «Ossory». Es de suma importancia que la entrega de la carta no se demore. ¿Qué le impide a usted facilitar el trabajo de Correos y ayudar a una señora añadiendo el nombre de esa localidad (si resulta que no lo ha puesto) de su propia mano? Se lo pregunto como al funcionario celoso de su deber que sin duda es usted; ¿qué objeción puede haber para no concederme mi petición?

El administrador de Correos se vio obligado a reconocer que no podía haber objeción alguna, siempre que no se añadiera más que lo necesario a la dirección, siempre que nadie tocara la carta salvo él mismo y siempre que no se permitiera que se desperdiciara el precioso tiempo de la oficina de correos. Dado que casualmente no había nada especial que hacer en aquel momento, estaba dispuesto a hacerle el favor a la señora a petición del señor Bygrave.

El capitán Wragge observó las manos del administrador de Correos mientras repasaban las cartas del buzón, conteniendo el aliento. ¿Estaba allí la carta? ¿Se detendría de pronto las manos del celoso funcionario? ¡Sí! Se detuvieron y separaron una carta del resto.

- ¿«Señor Noel Vanstone» ha dicho usted? -preguntó el administrador de Correos, sin soltar la carta.

- «Señor Noel Vanstone» -respondió el capitán-. «Residencia del almirante Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh.»

- «Ossory, Essex» -agregó el administrador de Correos, arrojando la carta de nuevo al buzón-. La señora no ha cometido ningún error, señor. La dirección es absolutamente correcta.

Nada salvo una oportuna consideración hacia la gran deuda contraída con las apariencias impidió al capitán Wragge lanzar al aire su blanco sombrero de copa tan pronto como se halló de nuevo en la calle. Todas sus dudas se habían despejado finalmente. La señora Lecount había escrito a su amo, ¡por lo tanto la señora Lecount se hallaba de camino a Zurich!

Con la cabeza más alta que nunca, con los faldones de su respetable levita ondeando al viento, con su natural desfachatez de carácter sentada alegremente en su trono, el capitán se encaminó pavoneándose a la posada y pidió el horario de trenes. Después de efectuar ciertos cálculos (por escrito, por supuesto), ordenó que tuvieran preparado el tílburi para una hora después, a fin de llegar a la estación a tiempo para coger el segundo tren a Londres, población con la que Aldborough no estaba comunicada por diligencia.

Su siguiente paso tuvo un cariz mucho más serio; su siguiente paso implicaba una extraordinaria seguridad en el éxito. Era jueves. De la posada se dirigió a la iglesia, habló con el sacristán y dio el aviso necesario para celebrar una boda mediante licencia el lunes siguiente.

A pesar de su audacia, el capitán tenía los nervios un poco alterados por esta última hazaña; le temblaba la mano cuando alzó el pestillo de la verja del jardín. Atendió a sus nervios con brandy y agua antes de llamar a Magdalen para informarle de sus pasos de la mañana. Era razonable esperar un nuevo estallido cuando Magdalen oyera que se había dado el último e irrevocable paso y se había concertado el día de la boda.

El reloj del capitán le advirtió de que no podía perder tiempo en vaciar el vaso. Pocos minutos después enviaba el mensaje para Magdalen. Mientras esperaba que bajara, se proveyó de ciertos materiales que eran ahora necesarios para llevar la empresa a su momento supremo. En primer lugar, escribió su nombre falso (en absoluto con el pulso tan firme como de costumbre) en una tarjeta de visita en blanco y debajo añadió estas palabras: «No hay tiempo que perder. Le espero en la puerta. Baje inmediatamente». Su siguiente acción fue sacar media docena de sobres del estuche de papel de cartas y poner en todos ellos la dirección siguiente: «Señor Thomas Bygrave, Mussared's Hotel, Salisbury Street, Strand, Londres». Después de guardarse con cuidado los sobres y la tarjeta en el bolsillo del pecho, cerró el escritorio. Magdalen entró en la habitación cuando él se levantaba de la silla.

El capitán tardó unos instantes en decidir cuál era el mejor método para iniciar la entrevista y resolvió, según sus propias palabras, lanzarse de cabeza. En dos palabras contó a Magdalen lo ocurrido y le informó de que el lunes sería el día de su boda.

Estaba preparado para tranquilizarla si Magdalen tenía un arrebato de cólera, para razonar con ella si le suplicaba un poco más de tiempo, para compadecerla si rompía a llorar. Con indescriptible sorpresa por su parte, los hechos echaron por tierra todas sus previsiones. Magdalen le escuchó sin pronunciar una palabra, sin derramar una lágrima. Cuando el capitán terminó, ella se desplomó en una silla. Sus grandes ojos grises fijaron en él una mirada perdida. En un misterioso instante, la abandonó toda su belleza, su rostro adquirió una espantosa rigidez, como la de un cadáver. Por primera vez desde que la conocía, el miedo -un miedo avasallador- se apoderó de ella en cuerpo y alma.

- No se irá a echar atrás -dijo el capitán, intentando sacarla de aquel estado-. No me diga que va a echarse atrás en el último momento.

La luz de la inteligencia no brilló en sus ojos, su rostro no se alteró, pero lo había oído, pues se movió un poco en la silla y lentamente meneó la cabeza.

- Usted planeó este matrimonio por propia voluntad -prosiguió el capitán con la mirada

furtiva y la voz titubeante de un hombre intranquilo-. La idea fue suya, no mía. No cargaré con esa responsabilidad, ¡no!, ni por dos veces doscientas libras. Si le falta valor, si se lo piensa mejor…

Se interrumpió. El rostro de Magdalen cambiaba, sus labios se movían al fin. Lentamente levantó la mano izquierda con los dedos extendidos, la miró como si no fuera su mano, contó los días con los dedos, los días que faltaban para la boda.

- Viernes, uno -susurró para sí-; sábado, dos; domingo, tres; lunes… -Las manos le cayeron sobre el regazo, su rostro volvió a ponerse rígido. El miedo mortal volvió a hacer presa de ella dejándola paralizada y sus siguientes palabras se extinguieron en sus labios.

El capitán Wragge sacó su pañuelo y se secó la frente.

- ¡Malditas doscientas libras! -dijo-. ¡Ni dos mil me pagarían por esto! -Volvió a guardarse el pañuelo, sacó del bolsillo los sobres que se había dirigido a sí mismo y, situándose junto a ella por primera vez, puso la mano sobre su hombro.

- Despierte -dijo-. Tengo que decirle una última cosa. ¿Puede escucharme?

Magdalen se esforzó por salir de su estupor, un leve tinte de color cubrió sus pálidas mejillas; asintió.

- Mire esto -prosiguió el capitán Wragge, mostrándole los sobres-. Si les doy el uso para el que han sido escritos, el amo de la señora Lecount no recibirá jamás su carta. Si los rompo, mañana sabrá por el correo de la mañana que es usted la mujer que lo visitó en Vauxhall Walk. ¡Usted decide! ¿Rompo los sobres, o me los guardo en el bolsillo otra vez?

Se produjo una pausa de absoluto silencio. El murmullo de las olas estivales en la playa de guijarros y las voces de los ociosos veraneantes en el paseo entraron flotando por la ventana abierta y llenaron la vacía quietud de la habitación.

Magdalen alzó la cabeza, levantó la mano y señaló los sobres con firmeza.

- Guárdeselos -dijo.

- ¿Lo dice en serio? -preguntó él.

- Lo digo en serio.

Cuando dio esta respuesta, les llegó el sonido de unas ruedas en la carretera.

- ¿Oye esas ruedas? -preguntó el capitán Wragge.

- Las oigo.

- ¿Ve el tílburi? -dijo el capitán, señalando por la ventana cuando el tílburi que había alquilado en la posada hizo su aparición junto a la verja del jardín.

- Lo veo.

- ¿Y me dice, por su propia voluntad, que me vaya en él?

- Sí. ¡Váyase!

Sin pronunciar una sola palabra más, el capitán se fue. La criada le esperaba en la puerta con la bolsa de viaje.

- La señorita Bygrave está indispuesta -dijo el capitán-. Dile a tu señora que vaya a verla al gabinete.

Se subió al tílburi y emprendió la primera etapa del viaje hasta St. Crux.

CAPÍTULO XII

Hacia las tres de la tarde, el capitán Wragge se detuvo en la estación más cercana a Ossory por la que pasaba el tren en su ruta a través de Essex. Las indagaciones que llevó a cabo inmediatamente le informaron de que podía ir en carruaje hasta St. Crux, quedarse allí un cuarto de hora y volver a la estación a tiempo para coger el tren vespertino a Londres. Diez minutos después el capitán se hallaba de nuevo en la carretera, viajando con rapidez en dirección a la costa.

Tras recorrer unos cuantos kilómetros por la carretera principal, el carruaje se desvió y el cochero se adentró en una intrincada red de caminos.

- ¿Estamos lejos de St. Crux? -preguntó el capitán, empezando a impacientarse y después de ver pasar kilómetro tras kilómetro sin aparecer indicios de que el viaje llegara a su fin.

- Verá usted la casa, señor, después de la siguiente curva -dijo el cochero.

La siguiente curva de la carretera les mostró de nuevo el campo abierto. Delante del carruaje, el capitán Wragge vio una larga y oscura línea recortada en el cielo; era el dique que protege de las inundaciones las tierras bajas de Essex. Un laberinto de arroyos que serpenteaban desde el invisible mar describiendo extrañas y fantásticas curvas cruzaba las marismas de parte a parte: ríos con la marea alta, canales de lodo con la bajamar. A su derecha había una pequeña aldea pintoresca, compuesta en su mayor parte por casas de madera que se extendían de forma irregular hasta la orilla de uno de los arroyos. A su izquierda, a lo lejos, se alzaban las lúgubres ruinas de una abadía con un desolado montón de edificios que cubrían dos lados de un cuadrado anexo. Uno de los arroyos que llegaban desde el mar (llamados en Essex «brazos de mar») rodeaba casi enteramente la casa. Otro, que llegaba desde la dirección opuesta, parecía atravesar los jardines y separar un lado de la masa informe de edificios, moderadamente reformados, del otro, que estaba poco menos que en ruinas. Puentes de madera y puentes de ladrillo cruzaban el arroyo y daban acceso a la casa desde todos los puntos del perímetro. No se veía criatura humana en los aledaños ni se oía sonido alguno salvo el ronco ladrido de un perro en algún invisible patio de la casa.

- ¿A qué puerta he de llevarle, señor? -preguntó el cochero-. ¿A la principal o a la de atrás?

- A la de atrás -contestó el capitán Wragge, pensando que cuanto menos atrajera la atención, mayor seguridad le ampararía.

El carruaje cruzó dos veces el arroyo antes de que el cochero hallara el camino a través de los jardines hasta un triste recinto de piedra. Junto a una puerta abierta de la parte deshabitada del lugar hallaron sentado a un anciano curtido que se afanaba en tallar a escala un barco aún a medio hacer. El anciano se levantó y se acercó a la portezuela del carruaje, subiéndose los anteojos a la frente y observando con desconcierto la aparición de un desconocido.

- ¿Se halla alojado aquí el señor Noel Vanstone? -preguntó el capitán Wragge.

- Sí, señor -respondió el anciano-. El señor Noel llegó ayer.

- Llévele esta tarjeta al señor Vanstone, por favor -pidió el capitán-, y dígale que espero aquí para verle.

Pocos minutos después, Noel Vanstone apareció sin resuello y ansioso; lleno de inquietud por las noticias de Aldborough. El capitán Wragge abrió la portezuela del carruaje, aferró la mano que le tendía y tiró de él hacia dentro sin ceremonias.

- Su ama de llaves se ha ido -susurró el capitán-, y usted se casará el lunes. No se altere

y no exprese sus sentimientos, no hay tiempo para eso. Consiga que el primer criado activo que encuentre en la casa le haga la bolsa en diez minutos, despídase del almirante y vuelva de inmediato conmigo para ir a coger el tren de Londres.

Noel Vanstone hizo un débil intento por formular una pregunta. El capitán se negó a escucharla.

- Hablaremos cuanto quiera de camino -dijo-. El tiempo es demasiado valioso para hablar aquí. ¿Cómo sabemos que Lecount no lo pensará mejor? ¿Cómo sabemos que no dará media vuelta antes de llegar a Zurich?

Esta sobrecogedora reflexión aterrorizó a Noel Vanstone, que cedió en el acto.

- ¿Qué le digo al almirante? -preguntó con impotencia.

- ¡Dígale que va a casarse, por supuesto! ¿Qué importa, ahora que Lecount no está aquí? Si le extraña que no se lo haya dicho usted antes, dígale que se fuga para casarse y que la novia le está esperando. ¡Deténgase! Cualquier carta dirigida a usted en su ausencia será enviada a este lugar, ¿no es así? Déle estos sobres al almirante y dígale que le remita sus cartas en sobres dirigidos a mí. Soy un viejo cliente del hotel al que vamos y, si lo encontramos lleno, podemos contar con que el propietario me guarde cualquier carta dirigida a mi nombre. Puede ser importantísimo que disponga de una dirección segura para recibir su correspondencia en Londres. ¿Cómo sabemos que Lecount no le escribirá de camino hacia Zurich?

- ¡Qué cerebro tiene usted! -exclamó Noel Vanstone cogiendo ávidamente los sobres-. Piensa en todo.

Bajó del carruaje sumamente agitado y corrió de vuelta a la casa. Diez minutos más tarde el capitán Wragge lo tenía bajo su custodia y los caballos iniciaban el camino de regreso a la estación.

Los viajeros llegaron a Londres a su debido tiempo esa noche y hallaron alojamiento en el hotel.

Conocedor de la naturaleza nerviosa e inquisitiva del hombre con el que tenía que tratar, el capitán Wragge había previsto cierta dificultad y azoramiento para responder a las preguntas que Noel Vanstone pudiera plantearle durante el viaje hacia Londres. Con gran alivio por su parte, un alarmante descubrimiento doméstico absorbió toda la atención de su compañero de viaje. Por un increíble descuido, la señorita Bygrave no había sido provista de doncella en vísperas de su boda. Noel Vanstone declaró que él se haría enteramente responsable de corregir esta deficiencia en los preparativos; no molestaría al señor Bygrave pidiéndole ayuda, consultaría con la patrona del hotel cuando llegaran al término de su viaje y examinaría personalmente a las candidatas para la vacante. Durante todo el trayecto a Londres volvió sobre el mismo tema una y otra vez; en el hotel, se pasó toda la velada entrando y saliendo del cuarto de estar de la patrona hasta que ésta se vio obligada a cerrar la puerta con llave. En todas las demás acciones relacionadas con su matrimonio, se había visto forzado a seguir los pasos de su ingenioso amigo. En la cuestión de la doncella de la dama reclamó por fin su propia posición; no siguió a nadie; ¡él llevaba la batuta!

La mañana del día siguiente se dedicó a la obtención de la licencia; Noel Vanstone aceptó vehementemente la distinción personal de declarar bajo juramento y juró de buena fe (según la información obtenida previamente del capitán) que la señorita era mayor de edad. Una vez obtenido el documento, el novio regresó para examinar el carácter y los méritos de las criadas desocupadas que la patrona se había comprometido a llamar al hotel, mientras que el capitán Wragge dirigía sus pasos, «por asuntos personales», a la residencia de un amigo que vivía en un barrio distante de Londres.

El amigo del capitán tenía relación con la ley y el asunto del capitán era de una doble naturaleza. Su primer objetivo era informarse de las consecuencias legales del inminente enlace en el futuro de los cónyuges. Su segundo objetivo era asegurarse de

antemano de que destruía toda pista del lugar al que podría dirigirse cuando abandonara Aldborough el día de la boda. Tras haber logrado su propósito en ambos casos, regresó al hotel y halló a Noel Vanstone cuidando su dignidad ofendida en el cuarto de estar de la patrona. Tres doncellas personales se habían presentado para el examen y, al llegar a la cuestión del salario, todas habían tenido el descaro de declinar la oferta. Se esperaba que una cuarta candidata se presentara al día siguiente y Noel Vanstone se negó en redondo a abandonar la metrópoli hasta que apareciera. El capitán Wragge expresó abiertamente su fastidio por el retraso innecesario en el regreso a Aldborough que así se ocasionaba, pero sin que produjera el menor efecto. Noel Vanstone meneó su obstinada cabecilla y se negó solemnemente a tomarse sus responsabilidades a la ligera.

El primer suceso que se produjo el sábado por la mañana fue la llegada de la carta escrita por la señora Lecount a su amo dentro de uno de los sobres que el capitán se había dirigido a sí mismo. El capitán la recibió en su dormitorio (previo acuerdo con la camarera), la leyó con la mayor atención y se la guardó cuidadosamente en la cartera. La carta presagiaba graves acontecimientos cuando el ama de llaves regresara a Inglaterra, y era justo que entregara aquel aviso de peligro en manos de Magdalen, que era la persona amenazada.

Más tarde apareció la cuarta candidata para el puesto de doncella, una joven de escasa ambición y modales sumisos que parecía (como señaló la patrona) una persona sobre la que se había abatido la desgracia. Pasó el examen con éxito y aceptó el salario ofrecido sin un murmullo de protesta. Tras haber ratificado ambas partes el compromiso, se originaron nuevos retrasos, de los que Noel Vanstone fue una vez más la causa. No había decidido si daría más de una guinea por la alianza y desperdició el resto del día en una joyería tras otra, con tan desastrosos resultados que él y el capitán y la nueva doncella de la novia (que viajaba con ellos) llegaron a la estación con el tiempo justo para coger el último tren vespertino que salía de Londres.

Era de noche cuando abandonaron el tren en la estación más cercana a Aldborough. El capitán Wragge había permanecido extrañamente silencioso durante todo el viaje. Estaba inquieto. Había dejado a Magdalen en circunstancias críticas sin una persona adecuada para controlarla, e ignoraba por completo el curso que habían tomado los acontecimientos en North Shingles durante su ausencia.

CAPÍTULO XIII

¿Qué había ocurrido en Aldborough en ausencia del capitán Wragge?

Se habían producido sucesos que el capitán, con toda su habilidad, hubiera hallado difícil remediar.

Tan pronto como el tílburi hubo abandonado North Shingles, la señora Wragge recibió el mensaje que su marido había encargado a la criada que le transmitiera. Se dirigió a la salita apresuradamente, perpleja por la acalorada entrevista con su marido y con el aire arrepentido de quien es consciente de haber obrado mal sin saber cómo. Si los pensamientos de Magdalen no hubieran estado enteramente ocupados por la sola idea de la boda, si hubiera estado lo bastante serena para escuchar el relato incoherente de la señora Wragge sobre lo que había ocurrido durante la entrevista con el ama de llaves, tarde o temprano la visita de la señora Lecount al guardarropa de Magdalen habría formado parte del descubrimiento; y aunque quizá ella no hubiera adivinado nunca la verdad, al menos hubiera advertido que había un elemento de peligro traicioneramente al acecho en el vestido de alpaca. Tal como estaban las cosas, la aparición de la señora Wragge en la salita no tuvo tal consecuencia, pues ésta no era entonces posible.

Sucesos que habían ocurrido esa misma mañana, sucesos que habían ocurrido en los días y semanas anteriores se habían desvanecido del pensamiento de Magdalen como si no se hubieran producido nunca. El horror del lunes siguiente, la cruel certidumbre implícita en la designación del día y la hora, petrificaron todos sus sentimientos y aniquilaron completamente su capacidad de pensar. La señora Wragge hizo tres intentos por separado de abordar el tema de la visita del ama de llaves. La primera vez hubiera dado lo mismo que se dirigiera al viento o al mar. El segundo intento pareció tener más posibilidades de éxito. Magdalen suspiró, escuchó un momento con indiferencia y luego declinó seguir con el tema.

- No importa -dijo-. El objetivo se ha cumplido igualmente. No estoy enfadada con usted. No diga nada más. -Pasadas unas horas y no teniendo nada más de que hablar, la señora Wragge volvió a intentarlo. Esta vez Magdalen se volvió hacia ella con impaciencia-. ¡Por amor de Dios, no me moleste con pequeñeces! No puedo soportarlo. -La señora Wragge enmudeció en el acto y no volvió a sacar el tema. Magdalen, que siempre había sido tan amable con ella en todas las demás ocasiones, se lo había prohibido airadamente. El capitán, que ignoraba por completo el interés de la señora Lecount en los secretos del guardarropa, ni siquiera se había acercado a la verdad. Toda la información que había extraído de la confusión mental de su mujer, la había conseguido mediante preguntas directas que surgían exclusivamente de lo que le era conocido. Había insistido en que quería respuestas claras sin excusas de ningún tipo; consiguió lo que quería como de costumbre, y su partida esa misma mañana no le dio posibilidad de volver sobre el asunto, aunque la irritación contra su mujer le hubiera permitido hacerlo. Allí quedó colgado el vestido de alpaca, olvidado en la oscuridad, centro inadvertido e insospechado de peligros venideros.

Hacia la tarde, la señora Wragge se armó de valor para hacer una sugerencia; pidió dar un pequeño paseo para tomar el aire.

Magdalen se puso el sombrero con apatía y apáticamente acompañó a la señora Wragge a lo largo del paseo público hasta que llegaron a su extremo norte. Allí la playa era solitaria; allí se sentaron, la una al lado de la otra, sobre los guijarros. El día era soleado y festivo; por las tranquilas aguas azules navegaban los barcos de recreo; Aldborough disfrutaba ociosamente en mar y tierra. La señora Wragge se animó con la alegre perspectiva; se divertía, como una niña, arrojando guijarros al mar. De vez en cuando lanzaba furtivamente una mirada inquisitiva a Magdalen y no hallaba en su actitud estímulo para hablarle, ni veía que su expresión adquiriera cordialidad. Magdalen estaba sentada en la pendiente de la playa de guijarros sin hablar, con un codo sobre la

rodilla y la cabeza apoyada en la mano, mirando el mar, absorta en la contemplación, pero sin que pareciera ver nada. La señora Wragge se cansó de los guijarros y perdió todo interés por mirar los barcos de recreo. Empezó a dar grandes cabezadas y acabó dormitando bajo la cálida y soporífera brisa. Cuando se despertó, los barcos de recreo estaban lejos; sus velas eran puntos blancos en el horizonte. Los ociosos que ocupaban la playa habían disminuido en número, el sol estaba bajo en el cielo, el mar azul tenía un tono más oscuro y la brisa rizaba su superficie. Los cambios en el cielo, la tierra y el océano anunciaban el declinar del día; por todas partes se notaba el cambio, excepto a su lado. Allí estaba Magdalen, sentada en la misma posición, con ojos cansados que seguían mirando el mar sin ver nada.

- ¡Oh, háble me, por favor! -dijo la señora Wragge.

Magdalen se sobresaltó y miró alrededor inexpresivamente.

- Es tarde -dijo estremeciéndose por la primera sensación que le llegaba de una brisa cada vez más fresca-. Vamos a casa; tiene que tomarse su té.

Caminaron hacia casa en silencio.

- No se enfade conmigo por preguntar -dijo la señora Wragge cuando se sentaron juntas para el té-. ¿Tiene usted el ánimo perturbado, querida?

- Sí -respondió Magdalen-. No se preocupe por mí. Pronto pasará.

Magdalen aguardó pacientemente hasta que la señora Wragge terminó de comer y luego subió a su dormitorio.

- ¡El lunes! -dijo cuando se sentó frente al tocador-. ¡Algo podría ocurrir antes de que llegara el lunes!

Sus dedos recorrieron maquinalmente cepillos y peines, y los pequeños frascos y estuches colocados sobre el tocador. Los ordenó ahora de un modo, ahora de este otro; luego los empujó de repente, amontonándolos lejos de sí. Sus manos permanecieron inactivas un par de minutos. Pasado ese intervalo, volvieron a impacientarse y se dedicaron a abrir y cerrar los dos pequeños cajones. Entre los objetos que había en el interior de uno de ellos se encontraba un devocionario que tenía en Combe-Raven y que había salvado con las demás reliquias del pasado cuando ella y su hermana se despidieron de la casa. Tras una larga vacilación abrió el devocionario por el oficio matrimonial, lo volvió a cerrar antes de leer una sola línea y lo devolvió precipitadamente a uno de los cajones. Después de darle la vuelta a la llave, se levantó y se acercó a la ventana.

- ¡Qué horrible mar! -dijo, dándole la espalda con un escalofrío de repugnancia-. ¡Qué horrible, solitario y monótono mar!

Volvió al cajón y sacó el devocionario por segunda vez, lo abrió a medias por el oficio matrimonial de nuevo, y lo arrojó al cajón con gesto impaciente. Esta vez, después de cerrarlo, se llevó la llave hasta la ventana abierta y la lanzó con todas sus fuerzas al jardín. Cayó sobre un espeso macizo de flores. Se hizo invisible; se había perdido. Esta sensación de pérdida pareció aliviarla.

«Algo podría ocurrir el viernes; algo podría ocurrir el sábado; algo podría ocurrir el domingo. ¡Tres días aún!»

Cerró los verdes postigos y corrió las cortinas para dejar la habitación a oscuras. Tenía la cabeza pesada y le ardían los ojos. Se tiró sobre la cama de mal humor, con el impulso de matar el tiempo durmiendo.

La quietud de la casa y la oscuridad de la habitación acudieron en su ayuda; el estupor en el que había caído hizo efecto sobre sus sentidos: se sumió en un sueño irregular. Sus manos inquietas se agitaban sin descanso; movía la cabeza de un lado a otro de la almohada; aún así, durmió. Al poco empezó a brotar alguna que otra palabra de sus

labios; palabras susurradas en sueños, cada vez más seguidas, mejor pronunciadas, cuanto más se prolongaba el sueño; palabras que parecieron calmar sus inquietudes y apaciguarla hasta sumirla en un reposo más profundo. Magdalen sonrió; se hallaba en el feliz país de los sueños; se le escapó el nombre de Frank. «¿Me quieres, Frank? -susurró-. ¡Oh, mi amor, dilo otra vez, dilo otra vez!»

Pasó el tiempo, la habitación se oscureció aún más y Magdalen seguía durmiendo y soñando. Hacia el crepúsculo, sin que ningún ruido del interior ni del exterior de la casa lo justificara, Magdalen se incorporó en la cama, de nuevo despierta. La soporífera oscuridad de la habitación la llenó de terror. Corrió hacia la ventana, abrió los postigos de golpe y se inclinó sobre el alféizar para recibir el aire y la luz del anochecer. Sus ojos devoraron las cosas más triviales que se veían en la playa; sus oídos se embebieron del grato murmullo del mar. ¡Cualquier cosa que la librase de la impresión que le habían dejado los sueños en el despertar! No más oscuridad; no más reposo. El sueño que llegaba compasivamente para otros se había apoderado de ella de forma traicionera. El sueño sólo le había cerrado los ojos al futuro para abrírselos al pasado.

Volvió a bajar a la salita, deseosa de hablar, por ociosa que fuera la conversación, por insignificantes que fueran los temas. La estancia estaba vacía. Quizá la señora Wragge estaba ocupada en su labor, quizá estaba demasiado cansada para conversar. Magdalen cogió su sombrero de la mesa y salió. El mar, que hacía unas pocas horas le horrorizaba, ahora parecía amistoso. ¡Qué hermoso era con el frío azul de la noche! ¡Qué divino regocijo en la alegre multitud de las olas que se elevaban hacia la luz del Cielo!

Magdalen permaneció fuera de casa hasta que cayó la noche y aparecieron las estrellas. La noche la tranquilizó.

Poco a poco su mente recobró el equilibrio, y examinó su situación sin pestañear. La vana esperanza de que un accidente malograra el fin por el que ella misma, voluntariamente, se había afanado y había conspirado se desvaneció y la abandonó, disipada por su propia debilidad. Sabía cuál era la auténtica disyuntiva y la afrontó. De un lado se hallaba la repugnante y terrible experiencia del matrimonio; del otro, el abandono de su propósito. ¿Era demasiado tarde para elegir entre sacrificar ese propósito y sacrificarse a sí misma? ¡Sí!, demasiado tarde. El camino de retorno se había cerrado a su espalda. El tiempo, que ningún deseo podía cambiar, el tiempo, que ninguna plegaria podía recuperar, había hecho de su propósito una parte de sí misma; en días pasados ella lo gobernaba, ahora la gobernada era ella. Cuanto más le aterrorizaba, cuanto más se debatía, más cruelmente la obligaba a seguir adelante. No había ningún otro sentimiento en ella que fuera lo bastante fuerte para dominarlo, ni siquiera el horror que la estaba volviendo loca: el horror de su matrimonio.

Volvió a la casa hacia las nueve.

- ¡Paseando de nuevo! -dijo la señora Wragge acudiendo a recibirla en la puerta-. Entre y siéntese, querida. ¡Qué cansada debe de estar!

Magdalen sonrió y dio a la señora Wragge una amistosa palmada en el hombro.

- Olvida lo fuerte que soy -dijo-. Nada me hace daño.

Encendió su bujía y volvió a subir a su dormitorio. Cuando regresó junto a su acostumbrado lugar ante el tocador, volvió a ella la vana esperanza de los tres días que quedaban, la vana esperanza de ser liberada por un accidente, esta vez de una forma más tangible que la que había adoptado hasta entonces.

«Viernes, sábado, domingo. Algo podría ocurrirle a él; algo podría ocurrirme a mí. Algo grave, algo fatal. Uno de nosotros podría morir.»

Su rostro mostró una súbita alteración. Magdalen se estremeció, aunque no hacía frío. Se sobresaltó, aunque ningún ruido pudo alarmarla.

«Uno de nosotros podría morir. Podría ser yo.»

Se sumió en hondas meditaciones, salió de ellas después de un rato y, abriendo la puerta, llamó a la señora Wragge para decirle algo.

- Tenía razón al pensar que me había fatigado -dijo-. El paseo ha sido demasiado para mí. Estoy cansada y voy a acostarme. Buenas noches. -Besó a la señora Wragge y volvió a cerrar la puerta con suavidad.

Tras dar unas cuantas vueltas arriba y abajo por la habitación, abrió de repente su estuche de papel y dio comienzo a una carta para su hermana. La carta fue extendiéndose bajo sus manos, llenando hoja tras hoja. Tenía el corazón oprimido por su historia, la propia historia que relataba a Norah. No derramó lágrima alguna, se hallaba en un estado de serena tristeza. La pluma se deslizaba suavemente sobre el papel. Tras escribir durante más de dos horas, se interrumpió antes de terminar. No puso firma; reservó un espacio en blanco para rellenarlo en algún otro momento. Después de guardar el estuche con las hojas escritas a salvo en su interior, se acercó a la ventana para tomar el aire y miró hacia el exterior.

Sobre el mar se veía la luna menguante. La brisa de unas horas antes se había extinguido. Sobre el océano y la tierra se cernía el espíritu de la noche en medio de una calma profunda y espantosa.

La cabeza le cayó pesadamente sobre el pecho y el paisaje menguó ante sus ojos como la luna. No veía el mar ni el cielo. La muerte tentadora le roía el corazón. La muerte tentadora señalaba hacia el hogar, hacia la tumba de sus difuntos padres en el cementerio de Combe-Raven.

«Diecinueve años en mi último cumpleaños -pensó-. ¡Sólo diecinueve!» Se alejó de la ventana, vaciló, y luego volvió a contemplar la vista.

- ¡Qué noche tan hermosa! -dijo con agradecimiento-. ¡Oh, qué noche tan hermosa!

Abandonó la ventana y se tumbó en la cama. El sueño que antes llegara traicioneramente llegó compasivo ahora, profundo, sin sueños, con la imagen del último pensamiento que había tenido despierta: la imagen de la Muerte.

A la mañana siguiente temprano, la señora Wragge entró en la habitación de Magdalen y descubrió que se había levantado al alba. Magdalen estaba sentada ante el espejo pasándose lentamente el peine por los cabellos, pensativa y silenciosa.

- ¿Qué tal se encuentra esta mañana, querida? -preguntó la señora Wragge-. ¿Bien del todo otra vez?

- Sí. -Tras responder afirmativamente, Magdalen se interrumpió, reflexionó un momento y se contradijo de repente-. No -dijo-, no del todo bien. Tengo un leve dolor de muelas. - Cuando cambió su respuesta, dio un giro al peine de modo que los cabellos le cayeron hacia delante y le taparon la cara.

Durante el desayuno permaneció muy callada y no tomó más que una taza de té.

- Déjeme que vaya a la botica y le traiga algo -dijo la señora Wragge.

- No, gracias.

- ¡Déjeme, por favor!

- ¡No!

Magdalen se negó por segunda vez con tono áspero y furioso. Como de costumbre, la señora Wragge cedió y dejó que se saliera con la suya. Cuando terminó el desayuno, Magdalen se levantó sin dar explicaciones y salió. La señora Wragge la observó desde la ventana y vio que tomaba la dirección de la botica.

Al llegar a la puerta del boticario, Magdalen se detuvo, hizo una pausa antes de entrar y miró por la ventana al interior; vaciló y se alejó un poco; volvió a vacilar y giró en la primera esquina que conducía de vuelta a la playa.

Sin mirar alrededor, sin importarle el lugar elegido, se sentó en la playa de guijarros. Las únicas personas que tenía cerca en aquel momento eran una niñera y dos niños pequeños. El menor de los dos llevaba un barquito de juguete en la mano. Después de contemplar a Magdalen durante un rato, con gravedad y atención singulares, el niño se acercó de repente y abrió el camino a una conversación colocando tranquilamente su juguete sobre el regazo de Magdalen.

- Mira mi barco -dijo el niño, cruzando las manos sobre la rodilla de Magdalen.

Magdalen no solía tener paciencia con los niños. En días más felices, no habría respondido al acercamiento del niño como respondió en aquel momento. La cruda desesperación de sus ojos los abandonó de repente; sus labios fuertemente apretados se abrieron y temblaron. Volvió a poner el barquito en manos del niño y lo aupó a él sobre su regazo.

- ¿Quieres darme un beso? -preguntó débilmente.

El niño miró el barquito como si prefiriera besarlo a él.

Magdalen repitió la pregunta casi con humildad. El niño le puso la mano en el cuello y la besó.

- Si fuera tu hermana, ¿me querrías?

Todo el dolor de su solitaria situación, sin amigos, toda la ternura desperdiciada de su corazón, salieron a borbotones con esas palabras.

- ¿Me querrías? -repitió, ocultando su rostro en el pecho del babero del niño.

- Sí -dijo el niño-. Mira mi barco.

Magdalen miró el barco a través de las lágrimas que pugnaban por brotar.

- ¿Cómo lo llamas? -preguntó, esforzándose por hallar el modo de interesar a un niño.

- Lo llamo barco del tío Kirke -dijo el niño-. El tío Kirke se ha ido.

El nombre no trajo ningún recuerdo a la memoria de Magdalen. En ella no quedaban más que los recuerdos del pasado.

- ¿Se ha ido? -repitió distraídamente, pensando en lo que le diría a su amiguito a continuación.

- Sí -dijo el niño-. Se ha ido a la China.

Aun saliendo de labios de un niño, aquella palabra le llegó directa al corazón. Bajó al pequeño sobrino de Kirke de su regazo y abandonó la playa al instante.

De vuelta a casa, la lucha de la pasada noche se reanudó en su interior; pero la sensación de alivio que le había producido el niño, la ternura revivida que había sentido mientras lo tenía sentado en la rodilla todavía ejercían su influencia sobre ella. Tuvo conciencia de que una esperanza incipiente empezaba a abrirse paso en sus pensamientos, como los ojos inocentes del niño se habían abierto paso hacia su rostro cuando se acercó a ella en la playa. ¿Era demasiado tarde para volver atrás? Una vez más se hizo esta pregunta, y ahora, por primera vez, dudó en responderla.

Corrió escaleras arriba hacia su dormitorio con una vaga desconfianza en su nuevo ser que le aconsejaba actuar sin pensar. Sin quitarse el chal ni el sombrero, abrió su estuche de papel de cartas y dirigió las siguientes líneas al capitán Wragge, tan deprisa como pudo trazarlas su pluma:

Encontrará el dinero que le prometí adjunto a ésta. Me ha faltado valor. El horror de casarme con él es más de lo que puedo soportar. He abandonado Aldborough. Compadézcase de mi debilidad y perdóneme. Que no volvamos a encontrarnos jamás.

Con el corazón palpitante, con dedos ávidos y temblorosos, sacó la bolsita blanca de seda de su seno para extraer los billetes de banco que adjuntaría a la carta. Su mano buscaba impetuosamente; su mano había perdido el sentido del tacto. Magdalen agarró todo el contenido de la bolsa en un solo puñado de papeles y los sacó violentamente, rompiendo algunos y desdoblando otros. Cuando los colocó ante ella sobre la mesa, el primer objeto con que tropezó su vista fue su propia letra desvaída ya por el tiempo. La examinó más de cerca y vio las palabras que había copiado de la carta de su difunto padre; vio el breve y terrible comentario del abogado encarándose con ella al pie de la página:

Las hijas del señor Vanstone no son hijas de nadie y la ley las deja desvalidas, a merced de su tío.

Su corazón dejó de latir; sus manos temblorosas se quedaron inmóviles y heladas. El pasado se alzó ante ella con un mudo y abrumador reproche. Magdalen cogió la nota que había escrito apenas hacía un minuto y miró la tinta aún húmeda de las letras con absorta incredulidad.

El color que había tintado sus mejillas huyó de ellas una vez más. La cruda desesperación asomó de nuevo a sus ojos secos, fría y brillante. Dobló los billetes de banco con cuidado y volvió a meterlos en la bolsita. Se llevó la copia de la carta de su padre a los labios y la devolvió a su lugar junto con los billetes. Cuando la bolsita se halló de nuevo en su seno, aguardó un rato con la cara oculta entre las manos; luego rompió lentamente la nota dirigida al capitán Wragge. Antes de que la tinta se hubiera secado, yacía fragmentada en el suelo.

- ¡No! -dijo Magdalen, cuando el último trozo de papel cayó de su mano-. Del camino que yo he emprendido, no hay retorno.

Se levantó serenamente y salió de la habitación. Cuando bajaba las escaleras se encontró con la señora Wragge que las subía.

- ¿Va a salir otra vez, querida? -preguntó la señora Wragge-. ¿Puedo ir con usted?

La atención de Magdalen se desvió. En lugar de contestar a la pregunta, respondió distraídamente a sus propios pensamientos.

- Miles de mujeres se casan por dinero -dijo-. ¿Por qué no habría de hacerlo yo?

La perplejidad impotente de la expresión de la señora Wragge cuando pronunció esas palabras, devolvió a Magdalen al presente.

- ¡Pobrecita mía! -dijo-. No me entiende, ¿verdad? No haga caso de lo que digo, todas las jóvenes dicen tonterías y yo no soy mejor que las demás! ¡Vamos! Le haré un regalo. Va a divertirse mientras no está el capitán. Daremos un largo paseo en coche nosotras solas. Póngase su elegante sombrero y venga conmigo al hotel. Le diré a la patrona que nos prepare una buena comida fría en una cesta. Tendrá todo lo que le gusta, y yo le serviré. Cuando sea una anciana, me recordará con bondad, ¿verdad? Dirá: «No era una mala chica; cientos peores que ella viven y prosperan y nadie las culpa por ello». ¡Vamos, vamos! Vaya a ponerse el sombrero. ¡Oh, Dios mío!, ¿de qué está hecho mi corazón? ¿Por qué sigue y sigue viviendo cuando a otras jóvenes se les hubiera muerto hace tiempo?

Media hora más tarde, Magdalen y la señora Wragge se hallaban sentadas juntas en el carruaje. Uno de los caballos se resistió a la hora de salir.

- Azótele -dijo Magdalen al cochero airadamente-. ¿De qué tiene miedo? ¡Azótele! ¿Y si volcara el carruaje -dijo, volviéndose de repente hacia su compañera- y yo saliera despedida y muriera en el acto? ¡Tonterías! No me mire de ese modo. Soy como su marido; tengo mi pincelada de humor, sólo estoy bromeando.

Estuvieron fuera todo el día. Cuándo regresaron a casa había anochecido ya. Las largas horas al aire libre produjo en ambas la misma sensación de fatiga. Una vez más, aquella noche Magdalen durmió profundamente y sin soñar, como la noche anterior. Y así concluyó el viernes.

Su último pensamiento antes de dormir había sido el mismo que la sostuviera durante todo el día. Había reposado la cabeza sobre la almohada con la misma resolución temeraria de someterse a la dura prueba que la aguardaba y que había sido expresada ya con palabras cuando se encontró por casualidad con la señora Wragge en la escalera. Cuando se despertó la mañana del sábado, esa resolución había desaparecido. Los pensamientos del viernes -los acontecimientos incluso de ese día- se habían borrado de su cabeza. Una vez más, deslizándose con un frío helador por sus venas llenas de sangre joven, sintió el lento y devastador acicate de la desesperación que se había adueñado de ella bajo la luna menguante y le había hablado en susurros en medio de la espantosa quietud.

- Vi el fin, tal como debe ser -se dijo a sí misma-, el jueves por la noche. He estado equivocada desde entonces.

Cuando se encontró con su compañera aquella mañana, volvió a quejarse de dolor de muelas, repitió su negativa a permitir que la señora Wragge le procurara un remedio y abandonó la casa después del desayuno en dirección a la botica, exactamente igual que la mañana del día anterior.

Esta vez entró en la botica sin vacilar.

- Tengo dolor de muelas -dijo con brusquedad al hombre de edad que atendía en el mostrador.

- ¿Me permite que le examine el diente, señorita?

- No es necesario. Es un diente hueco. Creo que he cogido frío en él.

El boticario recomendó varios remedios que estaban en boga hace quince años. Magdalen rechazó comprar ninguno de ellos.

- Siempre me ha parecido que el láudano alivia el dolor más que cualquier otra cosa -dijo, toqueteando los frascos que había sobre el mostrador y mirándolos mientras hablaba en lugar de mirar al boticario-. Déme un poco de láudano.

- Desde luego, señorita. Disculpe la pregunta, es una mera cuestión formal. ¿Se halla usted residiendo en Aldborough?

- Sí. Soy la señorita Bygrave, de North Shingles.

El boticario asintió y, volviéndose hacia sus estantes, llenó de láudano un frasco ordinario de media onza sin más dilación. Al averiguar de antemano el nombre y la dirección de su dienta, el boticario había obrado como era natural en un hombre precavido, pero su actitud no estaba en modo alguno generalizada, en circunstancias similares, por el estado de la ley en aquel tiempo.

- ¿Quiere que le ponga un poco de algodón con el láudano? -preguntó después de colocar una etiqueta en el frasco y escribir en ella una palabra en grandes caracteres.

- Hágame el favor. ¿Qué acaba de escribir en el frasco? -Magdalen formuló la pregunta con aspereza, con desconfianza y curiosidad a la vez en sus modales.

El boticario respondió a la pregunta dándole la vuelta al frasco para mostrarle la etiqueta. Magdalen vio escrito en grandes letras: «VENENO».

- Me gusta andar sobre seguro, señorita -dijo el hombre mayor, sonriente-. Personas muy capaces en otros aspectos son a menudo lamentablemente descuidadas en lo que a venenos se refiere.

Magdalen empezó a toquetear de nuevo los frascos del mostrador y formuló una pregunta con ansiedad mal disimulada por oír la respuesta.

- ¿Hay peligro -dijo- en una cantidad de láudano tan pequeña como ésta?

- Hay muerte en ella, señorita -respondió el boticario tranquilamente.

- ¿Muerte para un niño o una persona de salud delicada?

- Muerte para el hombre más fuerte de Inglaterra, quienquiera que sea.

Después de responder de esta manera, el boticario envolvió el frasco en papel blanco y tendió el láudano a Magdalen. Ella rió al cogerlo y pagar.

- No hay que temer accidentes en North Shingles -dijo-. Guardaré el frasco bajo llave en mi neceser. Si no me alivia el dolor, tendré que venir otra vez y probar algún otro remedio. Buenos días.

- Buenos días señorita.

Magdalen volvió directamente a casa sin alzar la vista una sola vez ni fijarse en ninguna de la personas que pasaron por su lado. En el pasillo pasó rozando a la señora Wragge como hubiera podido rozar un mueble. Subió las escaleras y se pisó dos veces el vestido, sencillamente por descuidar la precaución elemental de levantarlo. Los detalles triviales de la vida cotidiana habían dejado ya de existir para ella.

En la intimidad de su dormitorio, sacó la botella de su envoltorio y arrojó el papel y el algodón a la chimenea. En el momento en que lo hacía llamaron a la puerta. Magdalen ocultó el frasco y alzó los ojos con impaciencia. La señora Wragge entró en la habitación.

- ¿Ha comprado algo para el dolor de muelas, querida?

- Sí.

- ¿Puedo ayudarla en algo?

- No.

La señora Wragge se demoró con nerviosismo cerca de la puerta. Su actitud delataba claramente que tenía algo más que decir.

- ¿Qué quiere? -preguntó Magdalen con aspereza.

- No se enfade -dijo la señora Wragge-. Estoy intranquila por el capitán. Le gusta escribir, y no ha escrito. Es rápido como el rayo, y aún no ha vuelto. Ya estamos a sábado y ni rastro de él. ¿Cree usted que habrá huido? ¿Le habrá ocurrido algo?

- No lo creo. Vaya abajo y yo iré a hablarle de eso en seguida.

Tan pronto como se quedó a solas de nuevo, Magdalen se levantó de la silla, caminó hacia un armarito que había en la habitación y se detuvo un momento, dudando, con la mano en la llave. La aparición de la señora Wragge había perturbado el curso de sus pensamientos. La última pregunta de la señora Wragge, pese a su trivialidad, había detenido a Magdalen al borde del precipicio, había despertado en ella una vez más la antigua y vana esperanza de verse liberada por un accidente.

- ¿Por qué? -dijo-. ¿Por qué no podría haberle pasado algo a uno de los dos?

Colocó el láudano en el armarito, lo cerró y se metió la llave en el bolsillo. «Queda tiempo de sobra -pensó-, antes del lunes. Esperaré a que vuelva el capitán.»

Después de breves consultas en la planta baja, se acordó que la criada permanecería levantada toda la noche esperando el regreso de su amo. El día transcurrió tranquilamente sin acontecimientos de ningún tipo. Magdalen pasó las horas soñando despierta con un libro en las manos. Una cansada paciencia en la espera era todo lo que sentía ya; por fin, el tormento de sus pensamientos se había embotado y adormecido. Pasó mañana y tarde en la salita, vagamente consciente de un extraño sentimiento de aversión a volver a su dormitorio. A medida que avanzaba la noche y los ruidos se extinguían dentro y fuera de la casa, empezó a notar la inquietud. Se esforzó por calmarse leyendo. No consiguió concentrarse en los libros. El periódico yacía en un rincón de la estancia; Magdalen probó con él.

Miró maquinalmente los titulares de los artículos; volvió página tras página con apatía hasta que el relato de una ejecución en una lejana parte de Inglaterra atrajo su atención. No había nada que atrajera su atención en la historia del crimen, y sin embargo la leyó. Era un acto de derramamiento de sangre vulgar, horriblemente vulgar: el asesinato de una mujer que servía en una granja a manos de un hombre con la misma ocupación y que estaba celoso. Las pruebas que lo habían condenado no tenían nada de extraordinario; lo habían ahorcado en circunstancias que no tenían nada de extraño. Había confesado su crimen al comprender que no había esperanza para él, como otros criminales de su clase, y el periódico incluía la confesión al final del artículo, con las siguientes palabras:

Estuve saliendo con la muerta un año o algo así. Le dije que me casaría con ella cuando tuviera suficiente dinero. Ella dijo que ya tenía suficiente dinero. Nos peleamos. Ella no quiso salir más conmigo; no quería servirme la cerveza; se juntó con mi compañero, David Crouch. Fui a hablar con ella el sábado y le dije que me casaría con ella en cuanto pudieran correr las amonestaciones en la iglesia, si dejaba a Crouch. Ella se rió de mí. Me echó de la lavandería y todos los demás la vieron echarme. Yo no me quedé tranquilo. Me fui a sentar en el portillo, el portillo del prado que llaman Pettit's Piece. Pensé en pegarle un tiro. Fui y cogí mi escopeta y la cargué. Salí y me fui otra vez a Pettit's Piece. Una vez puesto a ello, no acababa de decidirme. Pensé en probar mi suerte, quiero decir si la mataba o no. Pensé en lanzar la escarda del arado al aire. Me dije para mis adentros: si cae plana la dejo vivir; si cae con la punta en la tierra, la mataré. Le di impulso y la tiré al aire. Cayó con la punta en la tierra. Fui y la maté. Era un trabajo sucio, pero lo hice. Lo hice como dijeron que lo había hecho en el juicio. Espero que el Señor tendrá compasión de mí. Deseo que le den mi ropa a mi madre. No tengo más que decir.

En la época más feliz de su existencia, Magdalen hubiera pasado por alto el relato de la ejecución y la confesión impresa que lo acompañaba; el asunto no hubiera atraído su atención. Ahora leyó la horrible historia y la leyó con un interés que ni siquiera comprendía. Su atención, que había vagado por regiones mejores y más elevadas, siguió todas y cada una de las frases de la espantosa confesión del asesino de cabo a rabo. Difícilmente habría leído el relato con mayor interés o habría notado que causaba una impresión más clara en ella, de haber conocido a aquel hombre o a aquella mujer, o de haberle sido familiar el sitio. Dejó el periódico, asombrada de sí misma; volvió a cogerlo e intentó leer algún otro fragmento de su contenido. El esfuerzo fue inútil: había vuelto a perder la concentración. Arrojó el periódico lejos de sí y salió al jardín. La noche era cerrada; las estrellas, escasas, y su luz, débil. Apenas veía el sendero de gravilla; sólo pudo pasearse de un lado a otro del sendero, entre la puerta de la casa y la verja del jardín.

La confesión del periódico se había adueñado de sus pensamientos de manera

espantosa. Mientras recorría el sendero, la negra noche se abrió sobre el mar y le mostró al asesino en el campo, arrojando la escarda al aire. Corrió de vuelta a la casa, temblando. El asesino la siguió a la salita. Magdalen cogió la bujía y subió a su habitación. La visión de su agitada fantasía la siguió hasta el lugar donde estaba escondido el láudano y allí se desvaneció.

Era medianoche y el capitán no había dado señales de vida.

Magdalen sacó la larga carta que había escrito a Norah del estuche de papel y la leyó despacio. La carta la sosegó. Cuando llegó al espacio en blanco del final, volvió apresuradamente al principio y empezó a leerla de nuevo.

El reloj de la iglesia dio la una y el capitán seguía sin aparecer.

Leyó la carta por tercera vez; volvió al principio obstinadamente, con desesperación, y la empezó por cuarta vez. Cuando llegó a la última página una vez más, consultó su reloj. Eran las dos menos cuarto. Acababa de guardarse el reloj en el cinturón del vestido cuando oyó el sonido de unas ruedas, distante en el silencio de la madrugada.

Dejó caer la carta y juntó sus frías manos sobre el regazo, con el oído atento. El sonido se acercaba cada vez más rápido; un sonido trivial para los demás, el sonido del Juicio Final para ella. Pasó junto al costado de la casa, avanzó un poco más, se detuvo. Magdalen oyó fuertes golpes en la puerta principal, luego una ventana que se abría, luego voces, luego un largo silencio, luego las ruedas que volvían, luego la puerta de abajo que se abría y el sonido de la voz del capitán en el pasillo.

No pudo soportarlo más. Abrió una rendija en su puerta y lo llamó.

El capitán corrió escaleras arriba al instante, asombrado de ver que Magdalen no estaba dormida. Magdalen le habló a través de la pequeña rendija manteniéndose oculta tras la puerta, pues le daba miedo que él le viera el rostro.

- ¿Ha salido algo mal? -preguntó.

- Puede estar tranquila -respondió él-. Nada ha salido mal.

- ¿Hay alguna posibilidad de que ocurra algún accidente entre hoy y el lunes?

- Ninguna en absoluto. La boda es cosa segura.

- ¿Cosa segura?

- Sí.

- Buenas noches.

Magdalen sacó la mano a través de la rendija. El capitán la cogió levemente sorprendido; desde que se conocían, Magdalen no le había dado la mano a menudo por voluntad propia.

- Ha estado levantada demasiado tiempo -dijo al notar los dedos fríos-. Me temo que pasará una mala noche; me temo que no dormirá.

Magdalen cerró la puerta con suavidad.

- Mi sueño -dijo- será más profundo de lo que cree.

Pasaban de las dos cuando se encerró sola en su habitación. La silla ocupaba su lugar habitual junto al tocador. Se sentó en ella durante unos minutos para pensar, luego abrió la carta para Norah y buscó el final, donde había un espacio en blanco. Las últimas líneas escritas sobre ese espacio rezaban así: «... He desnudado mi alma ante ti; no he ocultado nada. El resultado es éste. El fin por el que he peleado arduamente con

tan terrible coste para mí misma. He de alcanzarlo o morir. Es maldad, es locura, lo que tú quieras, pero es así. Tengo ahora ante mí dos caminos a elegir. Si puedo casarme con él, el camino hacia la iglesia. Si la profanación de mí misma es superior a mis fuerzas, ¡el camino a la tumba!».

Bajo esta última frase, escribió las siguientes líneas: «He hecho mi elección. Si la cruel ley te lo permite, entiérrame junto a mi padre y mi madre en el cementerio de casa. ¡Adiós, cariño mío! Sé siempre inocente; sé siempre feliz. Si alguna vez Frank te pregunta por mí, dile que morí perdonándole. No me llores demasiado tiempo, Norah. No lo merezco».

Selló la carta y escribió la dirección de su hermana. Las lágrimas afluyeron a sus ojos cuando la dejó sobre la mesa. Esperó a que se le aclarara de nuevo la vista y luego volvió a sacar los billetes de banco de la bolsita de su seno. Después de envolverlos en una hoja de papel de cartas, escribió el nombre del capitán Wragge y añadió estas palabras: «Cierre con llave la puerta de mi habitación y déjeme ahí hasta que llegue mi hermana. Aquí dentro está el dinero que le prometí. No tiene usted culpa alguna; la culpa es mía y sólo mía. Si tiene algún recuerdo amable de mí, sea bueno con su mujer para complacerme».

Tras colocar el paquete junto a la carta para Norah, se levantó y miró en su alrededor. Algunos pequeños objetos no estaban en su sitio. Los ordenó y corrió las cortinas de la cama a ambos lados de la cabecera. A continuación examinó la ropa que llevaba puesta. Estaba todo tan limpio, pulcro y bien arreglado como siempre. No había nada desordenado en ella, salvo los cabellos. Algunas trenzas se habían soltado de un lado de la cabeza; cuidadosamente volvió a ponerlas en su lugar con ayuda del espejo. «¡Qué pálida estoy! -pensó con una leve sonrisa-. ¿Estaré más pálida aún cuando me encuentren por la mañana?»

Se dirigió directamente al lugar donde había escondido el láudano y lo sacó. El frasco era tan pequeño que cabía perfectamente en la palma de su mano. Dejó que se quedara allí y lo miró durante un rato.

- ¡Muerte! -dijo-. En esta pizca de líquido marrón, ¡muerte!

Cuando pronunció estas palabras, en un instante se apoderó de ella la agonía de un horror indescriptible. Cruzó la habitación tambaleándose con una confusión enloquecedora en la cabeza y una angustia sofocante en el corazón. Se cogió a la mesa para sostenerse. El débil tintineo de la botella cuando le cayó de la mano y rodó sobre la mesa hasta un objeto de porcelana le atravesó el cerebro como un cuchillo. El sonido de su propia voz -su voz pronunciando esa única palabra, Muerte-, que se había atenuado hasta convertirse en un susurro, se le metió en los oídos como un viento impetuoso. Se arrastró hasta la cama y apoyó en ella la cabeza, sentándose en el suelo. «¡Oh, mi vida, mi vida! -pensó-. ¿Qué vale mi vida que me aferró a ella de esta manera?»

Transcurrido un intervalo, notó que recobraba las fuerzas. Se levantó de rodillas y hundió el rostro en la cama. Intentó rezar, rezar para que le fuera perdonada su búsqueda de refugio en la Muerte. De sus labios brotaron palabras frenéticas, palabras que se habrían alzado como gritos si no las hubiera ahogado en las sábanas. Se puso en pie; la desesperación le dio fuerzas con una furia desatada contra sí misma. En un momento había vuelto a la mesa; en otro, el veneno volvía a estar en su mano. Quitó el corcho y se llevó el frasco a la boca.

Al primer frío roce del cristal en los labios, su vida joven y fuerte se alzó en su sangre ardiente y luchó con todo el frenesí de su aborrecimiento contra el cercano terror a la Muerte. Todos los poderes activos de su exuberante energía vital se rebelaron contra la destrucción que su propia voluntad estaba dispuesta a infligirle a su propia vida. Se detuvo; por segunda vez, se detuvo a su pesar. Allí permaneció en la gloriosa perfección de su juventud y su salud; allí, temblando al borde de la existencia humana, permaneció, con el beso del Destructor cerca de los labios, y la Naturaleza, fiel a su sagrado deber, luchando por su salvación hasta el último momento.

De sus labios no surgió ninguna palabra. Sus mejillas enrojecieron intensamente, su respiración se hizo entrecortada. Con el veneno aún en la mano, con la sensación de que podía desmayarse en cualquier momento, Magdalen se dirigió a la ventana y descorrió la cortina.

Había amanecido un nuevo día. La aurora gris derramó su luz sobre ella, sobre el tranquilo mar del este.

Vio las aguas balanceándose en grandes olas silenciosas en medio de la calma brumosa; sintió en el rostro el aire fresco de la mañana. Recobró las fuerzas, su cabeza se despejó. La visión del mar le hizo recordar el paseo nocturno por el jardín y la imagen que su desbocada fantasía había pintado sobre el negro vacío. Volvió a ver mentalmente aquella imagen, la del asesino lanzando al aire la escarda del arado, dejando que el azar de donde cayera la punta decidiera la vida o la muerte de la mujer que lo había abandonado. Su ánimo se contagió de aquella terrible superstición tan repentinamente como el nuevo día había aparecido ante sus ojos. La promesa de liberación que vio en ella después del horror de su propia duda reavivó las últimas energías de su desesperanza. Decidió poner fin a la lucha poniendo su vida o su muerte en manos de la casualidad. ¿Qué casualidad?

El mar se la ofreció. Apenas distinguible entre la bruma, vio una pequeña flota de barcos de cabotaje que, arrastrados por la corriente, navegaban hacia la casa, siguiendo todos la misma dirección a favor de la marea. Media hora más tarde, quizá menos, la flota habría pasado frente a su ventana. Las manecillas de su reloj señalaban las cuatro. Magdalen se sentó pegada a la ventana dando la espalda a los barcos, con el veneno sobre el alféizar y el reloj en el regazo. Decidió esperar así media hora y contar los barcos a medida que fueran pasando. Si en ese tiempo contaba un número par, lo interpretaría como una señal de vida. Si triunfaba un número impar, el final sería la Muerte.

Tras tomar esta resolución, apoyó la cabeza en la ventana y aguardó a que pasaran los barcos.

Llegó el primero, grande, oscuro y cercano entre la bruma, deslizándose silenciosamente sobre el silencioso mar. Un intervalo, y le siguió el segundo, con el tercero pegado a él. Otro intervalo, mucho más largo, y no pasó nada. Magdalen miró el reloj. Doce minutos y tres barcos. Tres.

Llegó el cuarto, más lento que los demás, más grande que los demás, más lejos que los otros en la bruma. Le siguió un intervalo, de nuevo un largo intervalo. Luego pasó el siguiente barco, el más oscuro y cercano de todos. Cinco. El siguiente número impar: cinco.

Magdalen volvió a mirar el reloj. Diecinueve minutos y cinco barcos. Veinte minutos. Veintiuno, veintidós, veintitrés, y el sexto no llegaba. Veinticuatro, y el sexto apareció. Veinticinco, veintiséis, veintisiete, veintiocho; y el siguiente número impar, el fatídico siete, se deslizó ante su vista. Dos minutos para la media hora, y siete barcos.

Veintinueve y nada se vio tras la estela del séptimo barco. El minutero del reloj se movió hasta el medio minuto para la media, y todavía el blanco mar era un vacío brumoso. Sin apartar la vista de la ventana, cogió el veneno con una mano y alzó el reloj con la otra. A medida que corrían los segundos, sus ojos, igualmente rápidos, se movían del reloj al mar, del mar al reloj; miraron el mar por última vez y vieron el octavo barco.

Magdalen no se movió, no habló. La muerte de los pensamientos, la muerte de los sentimientos parecía haberla alcanzado ya. De forma mecánica volvió a poner el veneno en el alféizar de la ventana y contempló, como en un sueño, el barco que se deslizaba suavemente en su silenciosa ruta hasta fundirse en las sombras, hasta perderse entre la bruma.

La tensión a que estaba sometida se relajó cuando el mensajero de la vida desapareció de su vista.

- ¿La Providencia? -susurró débilmente para sí-. ¿O la casualidad?

Cerró los ojos y dejó caer la cabeza hacia atrás. Cuando recobró la sensación de la vida, el sol de la mañana calentaba su rostro, el cielo azul dominaba la vista y el mar era de oro.

Magdalen cayó de rodillas junto a la ventana y rompió a llorar.

Hacia el mediodía, el capitán, que aguardaba abajo y no oía ruido alguno en el dormitorio de Magdalen, empezó a inquietarse por el prolongado silencio. Pidió a la nueva doncella que le siguiera arriba y, señalando la puerta, le dijo que entrara con sigilo para ver si su señora estaba despierta.

La doncella entró en la habitación, permaneció un momento en el interior, salió y cerró la puerta suavemente.

- Está muy hermosa, señor -dijo la chica-, y duerme en paz como un recién nacido.

CAPÍTULO XIV

La mañana del regreso de su marido a North Shingles iba a ser memorable en el calendario doméstico de la señora Wragge. Ella fechaba en aquella ocasión la primera noticia que recibía del matrimonio de Magdalen.

El destino de la señora Wragge en este mundo era vivir en un estado de sorpresa perpetua. Sin embargo, nunca había deambulado por un laberinto de perplejidad como el laberinto en que se perdió cuando el capitán le contó fríamente la verdad. Ella había sido lo bastante sagaz para adivinar que el señor Noel Vanstone visitaba la casa en calidad de pretendiente a prueba y había interpretado vagamente ciertas expresiones de impaciencia que habían escapado de los labios de Magdalen como mal presagio para el cortejo, pero ni con toda su perspicacia había llegado a sospechar el inminente enlace. La señora Wragge pasó del colmo del asombro a un asombro aún mayor cuando su marido continuó con las revelaciones. ¡Una boda en la familia de un día para otro!, ¡y era la boda de Magdalen!, ¡y no se había encargado un solo vestido nuevo para nadie, ni siquiera para la novia!, ¡y el traje de cachemira oriental sin acabar cuando se presentaba una ocasión inmejorable para lucirlo! La señora Wragge se desplomó descuidadamente en una silla y se golpeó las rodillas asimétricas con las manos alborotadas, olvidando por completo la presencia del capitán y su terrible mirada. ¡No le hubiera sorprendido oír a continuación que había llegado el fin del mundo y que el único mortal al que el destino había descuidado al liquidar los asuntos del planeta era ella!

El capitán Wragge dejó que su mujer se calmara sola y se retiró a la planta baja de la casa en espera de que apareciera Magdalen. Era cerca de la una cuando el sonido de pasos en la habitación de arriba le advirtió de que Magdalen se había levantado. Inmediatamente el capitán llamó a la doncella (cuyo nombre era Louisa, según había averiguado) y la envió junto a su señora por segunda vez.

Magdalen se hallaba de pie junto al tocador cuando un débil golpecito en la puerta la sobresaltó. Al golpecito le siguió el sonido de una voz dócil que se anunciaba a sí misma como «su doncella» e inquiría si la señorita Bygrave precisaba de ayuda.

- Por el momento, no -dijo Magdalen, tan pronto como se recobró de la sorpresa de hallarse inesperadamente provista de doncella-. La llamaré cuando la necesite.

Tras despedir a la mujer con esta respuesta y apartar la vista de la puerta, Magdalen miró accidentalmente por la ventana. Cualquier especulación relativa a la nueva sirvienta en la que hubiera podido detenerse quedó de inmediato aplazada ante la visión del frasco de láudano que seguía sobre el alféizar de la ventana, allí donde lo había dejado a la salida del sol. Lo cogió una vez más con una extraña mezcla de emociones contradictorias, con la vaga duda, aún entonces, de si aquella visión le recordaba una terrible realidad o un horrible sueño. Su primer impulso fue deshacerse del frasco inmediatamente. Lo alzó para arrojar su contenido por la ventana, pero se detuvo, desconfiando súbitamente del impulso que había sentido. «He aceptado mi nueva vida - pensó-. ¿Cómo sé lo que me tiene reservada esa vida?» Dio la espalda a la ventana y volvió a la mesa del tocador.

- Puede que me vea obligada a tomarlo -dijo, y metió el láudano en su neceser.

No se quedó tranquila después de hacerlo; parecía haber cierta ingratitud indefinible en aquel acto. Aun así, no hizo intento alguno por sacar el frasco de su escondite. Terminó de arreglarse apresuradamente, adelantando el momento de llamar a la doncella y olvidarse de sí misma y de sus pensamientos concentrándose en algún otro tema. Después de tocar la campanilla, sacó de la mesa la carta para Norah y la carta para el capitán, las metió junto con el láudano en el neceser y cerró éste con la llave que llevaba siempre colgada de la cadena de su reloj.

La primera impresión que tuvo Magdalen de su doncella no fue agradable. No podía

examinar a la chica con el ojo experimentado de la patrona del hotel de Londres, que había reconocido en ella a una joven abatida por la desgracia y que había demostrado claramente con su expresión y sus maneras de qué naturaleza sospechaba que era esa desgracia. Sin embargo, y pese a esta desventaja, Magdalen fue totalmente capaz de detectar los signos de enfermedad y dolor que acechaban bajo la superficie de la diligencia y la cortesía de la muchacha. Sospechó que tenía mal carácter, no le gustó su nombre y estaba predispuesta a recibir mal a cualquier sirvienta que hubiera contratado Noel Vanstone. Pero tras los primeros minutos, «Louisa» se granjeó sus simpatías. Respondió a todas las preguntas que le formulaba con absoluta franqueza, parecía comprender perfectamente sus deberes y no hablaba nunca si no le dirigían primero la palabra. Después de formular todas las preguntas que se le ocurrieron en aquel momento y decidir que era justo darle una oportunidad, Magdalen se levantó para salir de la habitación. El aire mismo estaba impregnado aún del ambiente opresivo de la noche anterior.

- ¿Tienes algo más que decirme? -preguntó, volviéndose hacia la sirvienta con la mano en la puerta.

- Discúlpeme, señorita -dijo Louisa con tono muy respetuoso y discreto-. Creo que mi amo me dijo que la boda se celebraría mañana.

Magdalen reprimió el escalofrío que recorrió su cuerpo al oír aquella referencia a la boda en boca de una extraña y respondió afirmativamente.

- Es muy poco tiempo, señorita, para prepararlo todo. Si fuera usted tan amable de darme instrucciones sobre el equipaje antes de bajar…

- No habrá preparativos como tú supones -se apresuró a decir Magdalen-. Puedes hacer el equipaje con las pocas cosas que tengo aquí, si quieres. Mañana llevaré el mismo vestido que llevo hoy. Deja fuera el sombrero de paja y el chal claro y guarda todo lo demás en mis baúles. No tengo vestidos nuevos; no he encargado absolutamente nada para la ocasión. -Intentó añadir unas frases tópicas que justificaran con la mayor verosimilitud posible la ausencia del ajuar habitual y del vestido de novia. Pero de sus labios no saldría ninguna otra referencia a la boda. Abandonó la habitación sin pronunciar palabra.

La dócil y melancólica Louisa se quedó de piedra. «Aquí ocurre algo malo -pensó-. Casi empiezo a temer por mi nuevo empleo.» Suspiró con resignación, sacudió la cabeza y se dirigió al guardarropa. Primero examinó los cajones de abajo, sacó las diversas prendas de ropa interior que había en ellos y las colocó sobre las sillas. A continuación abrió la parte superior del armario y puso los vestidos que allí había sobre la cama, unos junto a otros. El último paso consistió en empujar los baúles vacíos hasta el centro de la habitación y contrastar el espacio de que disponía con las prendas que tenía que guardar. Completó los cálculos preliminares con la presta seguridad en sí misma de una mujer que conocía muy bien su trabajo y empezó a hacer el equipaje inmediatamente. Acababa de colocar la primera prenda de ropa interior en el baúl más pequeño, cuando se abrió la puerta del dormitorio y entró la criada de la casa, ávida de chismorreos.

- ¿Qué quieres? -preguntó Louisa tranquilamente.

- ¿Habías visto cosa igual? -dijo la criada, yendo al grano.

- ¿Igual a qué?

- A este matrimonio, claro. Me han dicho que eres de Londres. ¿Habías visto alguna vez que una señorita se case sin ajuar? No hay velo, ni banquete de boda, ni regalos para los criados. Es tentar a la Providencia, eso es lo que yo digo. Ya sé que sólo soy una pobre criada, pero es malo, malo de verdad, ¡y no me importa quién me oiga!

Louisa siguió haciendo el equipaje.

- ¡Fíjate en sus vestidos! -insistió la criada, agitando la mano con indignación para señalar la cama-. Yo sólo soy una pobre chica, pero no me casaría ni con el mejor

hombre del mundo sin un vestido nuevo que echarme a la espalda. ¡Mira esto!, fíjate en esta cosa marrón. ¡Alpaca! No irás a meter en el baúl esta cosa de alpaca, ¿verdad? ¡Pero si no sirve ni para una criada! No sé si lo aceptaría si me lo regalaran. A mí me quedaría bien si le subiera el bajo y le ensanchara la cintura, y no estaría tan mal con unos cuantos adornos de color, ¿no?

- Deja ese vestido, por favor -dijo Louisa, con la misma calma.

- ¿Qué has dicho? -preguntó la otra, sin dar crédito a sus oídos.

- He dicho que dejes ese vestido. Pertenece a la señora y tengo órdenes de la señora de guardar todo lo que hay en la habitación. Tú no me ayudas presentándote aquí, me estás estorbando.

- ¡Bueno! -dijo la criada-, puede que seas de Londres, como dicen, pero si ésos son los modales de Londres, ¡me quedo con Suffolk! -Abrió la puerta tirando airadamente del picaporte, la cerró con un portazo, volvió a abrirla y asomó la cabeza-. ¡Me quedo con Suffolk! -dijo la criada, despidiéndose con una inclinación de cabeza para subrayar el sarcasmo.

Louisa siguió haciendo el equipaje, impertérrita.

Después de colocar la ropa interior pulcramente doblada en el baúl pequeño, pasó a ocuparse de los vestidos. Luego los revisó con atención para determinar cuál era el menos valioso y colocarlo en el fondo del baúl debajo de los demás, e hizo su elección con escasas dificultades. El primer vestido que metió en el baúl fue el vestido de alpaca marrón.

Mientras tanto, Magdalen se había reunido con el capitán en la planta baja. Aunque él no dejó de notar la languidez de su rostro ni el nerviosismo de sus movimientos, le alivió descubrir que le saludaba con absoluta tranquilidad, y que incluso se mostraba lo bastante dueña de sí misma para pedirle noticias del viaje sin más signos de agitación que un cambio de color pasajero y un leve temblor de los labios.

- Hasta aquí lo referente al pasado -dijo el capitán Wragge cuando su relato sobre la expedición a Londres pasando por St. Crux llegó a su fin-. Ahora hablemos del presente. El novio…

- Si no le importa -le interrumpió Magdalen-, llámele señor Noel Vanstone.

- De mil amores. El señor Noel Vanstone vendrá aquí esta tarde a cenar y pasar luego la velada. Se mostrará pesado hasta la saciedad, pero como ocurre con todos los pesados, no habrá manera de zafarse de él. Antes de que venga, tengo que advertirle de un par de cosas en privado. Mañana a estas horas nos habremos separado sin saber con certeza, por ninguna de las dos partes, si volveremos a vernos. Deseo ser útil a sus intereses fielmente hasta el final; deseo que sienta usted que he hecho cuanto podía hacer por su futura seguridad cuando nos digamos adiós.

Magdalen lo miró sorprendida. El capitán hablaba con el tono alterado, se mostraba agitado, extrañamente serio. Vio algo en su expresión y sus maneras que le recordó la primera noche en Aldborough, cuando los dos se habían sentado a solas en la cuesta de la atalaya y ella le había revelado sus intenciones en la penumbra solitaria.

- No tengo razones para pensar más que cosas buenas de usted -dijo Magdalen.

El capitán Wragge abandonó su silla de repente y dio una vuelta por la habitación. Las últimas palabras de Magdalen parecían haberle trastornado de manera extraordinaria.

- ¡Maldita sea! -espetó el capitán-. No puedo dejar que diga eso. Tiene razones para pensar mal de mí. La he engañado. Jamás le entregué lo que le correspondía de verdad de los beneficios del espectáculo. ¡Bueno! ¡Ahora ya lo sabe!

Magdalen sonrió y le hizo señas de que volviera a sentarse.

- Ya sé que me engañó -dijo ella tranquilamente-. Se hallaba usted en el ejercicio de su profesión, capitán Wragge. Lo esperaba cuando me asocié con usted. No me quejé en su momento y no voy a quejarme ahora. Si el dinero del que se apoderó sirve de recompensa por todas las molestias que le he causado, está a su entera disposición.

- ¿Querrá estrecharme la mano? -preguntó el capitán, con una torpeza y una vacilación que contrastaban vivamente con su acostumbrada desenvoltura.

Magdalen le tendió la mano. El capitán la estrechó con fuerza.

- Es usted una joven extraña -dijo, intentando hablar con un tono despreocupado-. Tiene usted un ascendiente sobre mí que no acabo de comprender. Casi me siento incómodo aceptando ahora su dinero y, sin embargo, usted no lo quiere, ¿verdad? -Titubeó-. Casi desearía -dijo- no haberla conocido en la muralla de York.

- Es demasiado tarde para desear eso, capitán Wragge. No siga. Sus palabras no hacen sino afligirme, no siga. Tenemos otras cosas de que hablar. ¿Cuáles eran esas advertencias que quería hacerme en privado?

El capitán dio otra vuelta por la habitación y se esforzó por volver a meterse en su papel cotidiano. Sacó de su cartera la carta que había dirigido la señora Lecount a su amo y se la tendió a Magdalen.

- Ésta es la carta que podría haber causado nuestra ruina si hubiera llegado a su destino -dijo-. Léala con atención. Tengo una pregunta que hacerle cuando termine.

Magdalen leyó la carta.

- ¿Cuál es esa prueba -inquirió- en la que la señora Lecount confía con tal seguridad en sí misma?

- Lo mismo iba a preguntarle yo -dijo el capitán Wragge-. Haga memoria de lo que ocurrió cuando probó aquel experimento en Vauxhall Walk. ¿No dispuso la señora Lecount de ninguna otra oportunidad desfavorable para usted aparte de las que ya me ha contado?

- Descubrió que llevaba el rostro maquillado y me oyó hablar con mi propia voz.

- ¿Y nada más?

- Nada más.

- Perfectamente. Entonces está claro que mi interpretación de la carta es la correcta. La prueba en la que confía la señora Lecount es la infernal historia de fantasmas de mi mujer, lo cual, en pocas palabras, significa que la señorita Bygrave fue vista disfrazada como la señorita Vanstone y que el testigo es la misma persona que después se ha presentado en Aldborough en calidad de tía de la señorita Bygrave. Una excelente posibilidad para la señora Lecount si consigue echarle el guante a la señora Wragge en el momento oportuno, y ninguna posibilidad en absoluto si no lo consigue. Puede estar tranquila a ese respecto. La señora Lecount y mi mujer no volverán a verse. Mientras tanto, no olvide la advertencia que le hago al darle esta carta. Rómpala para evitar accidentes, pero no la olvide.

- Puede estar seguro de que la recordaré -dijo Magdalen, destruyendo la carta mientras hablaba-. ¿Tiene algo más que decirme?

- Tengo cierta información que darle -respondió el capitán Wragge- que podría serle útil, pues se refiere a su seguridad futura. Cuidado, no quiero saber nada de lo que hará cuando acabe el día de mañana; eso quedó acordado cuando hablamos del asunto por primera vez. No hago preguntas ni suposiciones. Lo único que quiero hacer ahora es aconsejarle sobre su situación legal después del enlace y dejar que usted haga uso del consejo como mejor le plazca, a su entera discreción. Consulté la opinión de un abogado mientras estaba en Londres, pensando que podría serle de utilidad.

- Sin duda lo será. ¿Qué dijo el abogado?

- Hablando claro, esto es lo que dijo. Si el señor Noel Vanstone descubre un día que usted se ha casado con él con un nombre falso deliberadamente, puede solicitar del tribunal eclesiástico que declare el matrimonio nulo y sin valor. El resultado de su petición dependería de los jueces, pero si pudiera demostrar que ha sido engañado intencionadamente, la opinión profesional es que tendría grandes posibilidades de conseguirlo.

- ¿Y suponiendo que fuera yo quien lo solicitara? -preguntó Magdalen ávidamente-. ¿Qué ocurriría entonces?

- Podría presentar la solicitud -respondió el capitán-. Pero recuerde una cosa, tendría que presentarse ante el tribunal reconociendo su propio engaño. Ya se puede imaginar lo que pensarían los jueces.

- ¿Le dijo algo más el abogado?

- Una cosa más -dijo el capitán Wragge-. Haga lo que haga la ley con el matrimonio en vida de ambos contrayentes, a la muerte de uno de los dos, el superviviente no podría solicitar la anulación y el matrimonio seguiría siendo válido hasta su muerte. ¿Lo entiende? Si él muere o muere usted, y si no se ha presentado la solicitud de anulación, el que sobreviva no podrá poner en duda el matrimonio. Pero mientras vivan los dos, si él decidiera pedir la disolución del matrimonio, lo tendría todo a su favor.

El capitán miró a Magdalen con curiosidad furtiva mientras pronunciaba estas palabras. Magdalen volvió el rostro, haciendo y deshaciendo un nudo en la cadena de su reloj distraídamente, reflexionando sin duda con la mayor concentración en lo que acababa de decirle. El capitán Wragge se acercó a la ventana con nerviosismo y contempló la vista. El primer objeto que llamó su atención fue el señor Noel Vanstone que llegaba desde Sea-View. Al instante regresó junto a Magdalen y se dirigió a ella una vez más.

- Ahí está el señor Noel Vanstone -dijo-. Una última advertencia antes de que entre. Tenga cuidado con él en lo que respeta a su edad. Me la preguntó para pedir la licencia. Yo corté por lo sano y le dije que tenía usted veintiún años, y así lo declaró él. No se preocupe por mí, a partir de mañana seré invisible, pero no olvide por su propio bien, si se habla de ello, que era mayor de edad cuando se casó. Nada más. Ha recibido usted todas las advertencias necesarias que yo podía hacerle. Ocurra lo que ocurra en el futuro, recuerde que he hecho todo lo posible.

El capitán se dirigió presuroso hacia la puerta sin aguardar respuesta y salió a recibir a su invitado en el jardín.

Noel Vanstone hizo su aparición en la verja de North Shingles llevando solemnemente su regalo de bodas con ambas manos. El objeto en cuestión era un joyero antiguo (una de las gangas de su padre); en el interior del joyero descansaba un anticuado broche con un carbúnculo engastado en plata (otra de las gangas de su padre); regalos ambos que poseían el mérito inestimable de no haber inquietado su bolsillo. Meneó la cabeza ominosamente cuando el capitán preguntó por su salud y su estado de ánimo. Noel Vanstone había pasado la noche en blanco, asaltado, una vez a solas en Sea-View, por los temores irrefrenables de una súbita reaparición de Lecount. Sea-View estaba impregnada de Lecount; Sea-View (aunque construida sobre pilotes y siendo la casa más segura de Inglaterra) era desde entonces odiosa para él. Había tenido esa sensación durante toda la noche; también había tomado conciencia de sus responsabilidades. La doncella de su dama, para empezar. Después de haberla contratado, empezaba a pensar que no iba a servirle. Podía ponérsele enferma; podía haberle engañado asumiendo una falsa personalidad; quizá la patrona del hotel y ella se habían conchabado contra él. ¡Horrible! Realmente era horrible pensarlo. Después estaba su otra responsabilidad -quizá la más pesada de las dos-, la de decidir dónde iban a pasar la luna de miel. Él hubiera preferido una de las casas vacías de su padre. Pero, excepto la de Vauxhall Walk (a la que suponía que se pondrían reparos) y la de Aldborough (en la que naturalmente no se podía ni pensar), todas estaban alquiladas.

Se ponía en manos del señor Bygrave. ¿Dónde había pasado el señor Bygrave su luna de miel? Teniendo las islas Británicas para elegir, ¿dónde plantaría su tienda de campaña el señor Bygrave con la debida atención a las circunstancias?

En aquel punto finalizaron bruscamente las preguntas del novio y su rostro mostró una expresión de incontenible asombro. Su juicioso amigo, de cuyo consejo había disfrutado enteramente en todas las emergencias, le abandonó de pronto ante la emergencia de la luna de miel y se negó tajantemente a hablar de ese tema.

- ¡No! -dijo el capitán, cuando Noel Vanstone abrió la boca para pedir ser escuchado-. Tendrá que disculparme. En este caso, como de costumbre, tengo mi particular punto de vista. Hace un tiempo que vivo en una atmósfera de engaños por su conveniencia. Esa atmósfera, mi buen señor, empieza a ser sofocante; mi ser moral precisa ser ventilado. Resuelva la cuestión del lugar con mi sobrina y manténgame, a petición mía, en una total ignorancia sobre su decisión. Sin duda la señora Lecount vendrá aquí a su regreso de Zurich y sin duda me preguntará adonde han ido. Puede que le parezca extraño, señor Vanstone, pero cuando le conteste que no lo sé, deseo gozar del desacostumbrado placer de sentir, por una vez, ¡que estoy diciendo la verdad!

Expresándose así, abrió la puerta de la salita, llevó a Noel Vanstone ante Magdalen, volvió a salir inclinando la cabeza y abandonó la casa solo para pasar el resto de la tarde dando un paseo. Su rostro mostraba claros signos de inquietud y sus ojos bicolores miraban recelosamente aquí y allá mientras caminaba lentamente a lo largo de la playa. «El tiempo discurre lentamente entre nuestros dedos -pensó el capitán-. Ojalá el día de mañana hubiera pasado ya.»

El día pasó y no ocurrió nada; la tarde y la noche se sucedieron plácidamente y sin incidentes. Llegó el lunes, un precioso día sin nubes. El lunes confirmó la afirmación del capitán: la boda era cosa segura. Hacia las diez de la mañana, el sacristán subió las escaleras de la iglesia y, al encontrarse bajo el pórtico al encargado de abrir los bancos, citó el viejo proverbio: «¡Feliz la novia para la que brilla el sol!».

Un cuarto de hora después, los contrayentes y sus acompañantes se hallaban en la sacristía y el pastor los conducía al altar. Pese a que la boda se había guardado en secreto, el hecho de que se abriera la iglesia por la mañana había bastado para darlo a conocer. Una pequeña congregación compuesta casi enteramente por mujeres se repartía por los bancos. La hermana de Kirke y sus hijos se hallaban de visita en casa de una amiga de Aldborough… y la hermana de Kirke formaba parte de la congregación.

Cuando el cortejo nupcial entró en la iglesia, Noel Vanstone contagió al capitán su terror obsesivo a la señora Lecount. En los primeros minutos, los ojos de ambos escudriñaron los bancos unidos en la misma búsqueda y se apartaron con la misma sensación de alivio. El pastor se percató de aquellas miradas y examinó la licencia con mayor detenimiento del habitual. El sacristán empezó a tener sus dudas de que el viejo proverbio sobre las novias fuera siempre certero. Las feligresas murmuraron entre sí por el inexcusable desprecio hacia las apariencias que implicaba el vestido de la novia. La hermana de Kirke susurró malévolamente al oído de su amiga: «Gracias a Dios por lo de hoy, en bien de Robert». La señora Wragge lloraba quedamente, temiendo la amenaza de no sabía qué calamidad. La única de los presentes que en su aspecto externo permaneció impávida fue la propia Magdalen. Ocupó con resignación y los ojos secos su lugar ante el altar, como si todas las fuentes de la emoción humana se hubieran helado en su interior.

El pastor abrió la Biblia.

Estaba hecho. Las espantosas palabras que ascendían de la Tierra al Cielo ya se habían pronunciado. Los hijos de los difuntos hermanos -herederos de la implacable enemistad que había separado a sus padres- eran marido y mujer.

A partir de aquel punto, los acontecimientos se precipitaron con asombrosa celeridad hasta el momento de la despedida. Ya habían regresado a la casa, pero las frases del oficio matrimonial aún parecían resonar en sus oídos. Antes de que hubieran pasado cinco minutos, el carruaje se detuvo ante la verja. Un minuto después llegó la oportunidad que Magdalen y el capitán habían estado buscando, la oportunidad de hablar en privado por última vez. Magdalen conservaba su fría resignación; parecía ahora fuera del alcance del miedo que antes la dominara y de los remordimientos que antes torturaban su alma. Con mano firme entregó al capitán el dinero prometido. Con expresión firme lo miró por última vez.

- Yo no tengo la culpa -susurró él con vehemencia-. Me he limitado a hacer lo que me pidió. -Magdalen inclinó la cabeza, la inclinó hacia él amablemente y dejó que le tocara la frente con los labios-. ¡Tenga cuidado! -dijo el capitán-. Mis últimas palabras son, ¡por amor de Dios, tenga cuidado cuando yo ya no esté! -Magdalen le dio la espalda con una sonrisa y se despidió de su mujer. La señora Wragge se esforzó por afrontar la pérdida valientemente, la pérdida de la amiga cuya presencia había sido como una luz caída del Cielo sobre el oscuro sendero de su vida.

- Ha sido usted muy buena conmigo, querida; le doy las gracias; le doy las gracias de todo corazón. -No pudo decir más; se aferró a Magdalen estallando en lágrimas, como se hubiera aferrado a ella su madre, de haber vivido para ver aquel horrible día-. ¡Temo por usted! -exclamó la pobrecilla con un frenético gemido-. ¡Oh, querida, temo por usted! -Magdalen se desasió desesperadamente, la besó y se dirigió a la puerta a toda prisa. La expresión de aquella gratitud espontánea, el llanto de aquel amor leal, consiguieron perturbar a Magdalen, que hasta entonces había permanecido impasible. El carruaje sería su refugio, pese a que el hombre con el que se había casado la esperara junto a la portezuela.

La señora Wragge intentó seguirla al jardín, pero el capitán había visto el rostro de Magdalen cuando ésta salió corriendo y retuvo a su mujer en el pasillo con firmeza. Desde esa distancia se intercambiaron las últimas palabras de despedida. Mientras el carruaje estuvo a la vista de la casa, Magdalen miró hacia atrás y agitó el pañuelo cuando dio la vuelta a la esquina. Instantes después se rompía el último cabo que la unía a ellos: ¡la compañía familiar de todos aquellos meses era ya cosa del pasado!

El capitán Wragge cerró la puerta a los curiosos que observaban desde el paseo. Llevó a su mujer de nuevo a la salita y le habló con una indulgencia que jamás antes le había mostrado.

- Ella ha emprendido su propio camino -dijo-, y dentro de una hora nosotros habremos emprendido el nuestro. Llora cuanto quieras, desahógate. No niego que es digna de lástima.

Incluso entonces, incluso cuando más sombrío era su temor por el futuro de Magdalen, persistió el hábito dominante de toda una vida. Maquinalmente abrió su maletín. Maquinalmente abrió su Libro Mayor y consignó por escrito la entrada final, la entrada de su última transacción con Magdalen. «Recibido de la señorita Vanstone -escribió el capitán, ceñudo y con expresión lúgubre-. Doscientas libras.»

- ¿No se enfadará conmigo? -dijo la señora Wragge, mirando tímidamente a su marido a través de las lágrimas-. Quiero una palabra de consuelo, capitán. Oh, por favor, dígame, ¿cuándo volveré a verla?

El capitán cerró el libro y respondió con una palabra inexorable:

- Jamás.

Entre las once y las doce de aquella misma noche, el carruaje de la señora Lecount entraba en Zurich.

La casa de su hermano, ante la cual se detuvo, estaba cerrada. Le costó tiempo y

esfuerzo despertar a la criada, que alzó las manos con mudo asombro al abrir la puerta y ver quién era la visitante.

- ¿Está vivo mi hermano? -preguntó la señora Lecount entrando en la casa.

- ¡Vivo! -repitió la criada-. Se ha ido de vacaciones al campo para acabar la convalecencia respirando aire puro.

El ama de llaves se tambaleó hasta dar de espaldas contra la pared del pasillo. El cochero y la criada la sentaron en una silla. La señora Lecount tenía el rostro lívido y le castañeteaban los dientes.

- Envíe a buscar al médico de mi hermano -dijo, en cuanto recuperó el habla.

El médico llegó. Ella le tendió una carta antes de que pudiera decir nada.

- ¿Escribió usted esa carta?

El la repasó rápidamente y respondió sin vacilar.

- ¡Desde luego que no!

- Es su letra.

- Es una falsificación de mi letra.

La señora Lecount se levantó de la silla con nuevos bríos.

- ¿Cuándo sale el tren correo en dirección a París? -preguntó.

- Dentro de media hora.

- ¡Envíe a alguien inmediatamente a reservarme un asiento en él!

La criada vaciló, el médico protestó. Ella hizo oídos sordos a ambos.

- ¡Envíe a alguien! -repitió-. O iré yo misma.

Los demás obedecieron. La criada fue a reservar el asiento; el médico se quedó y mantuvo una conversación con la señora Lecount. Cuando pasó la media hora, la ayudó a ocupar su asiento en el tren correo y, por su cuenta, encargó al conductor que se ocupara de la pasajera.

- Ha viajado hasta aquí desde Inglaterra sin interrupción -dijo el médico- y ahora regresa sin haber descansado. Cuide de ella o acabará desmoronándose a causa de la fatiga del doble trayecto.

El tren correo emprendió la marcha. Antes de que la primera hora del nuevo día llegase a su fin, la señora Lecount se hallaba de nuevo de camino a Inglaterra.

FIN DE LA CUARTA ESCENA

ENTREACTO

DESARROLLO DE LA HISTORIA A TRAVÉS DEL CORREO

I

DE GEORGE BARTRAM A NOEL VANSTONE

St. Crux, 4 de septiembre de 1847

Mi querido Noel:

Dos preguntas claras para empezar. En nombre de todos los misterios, ¿de qué te escondes? ¿Y por qué todo lo que se relaciona con tu boda sigue siendo un secreto impenetrable para tus amigos más íntimos?

He estado en Aldborough en busca de alguna pista que me llevara hasta ti y he vuelto tal como me marché. He escrito a tu abogado de Londres y me ha contestado que le has prohibido revelar a nadie el lugar al que te has retirado si no recibía primero tu permiso. Lo único que he podido sacarle es que te remitiría cualquier carta que encomendara a su cuidado. Te escribo por tanto y, cuidado, espero respuesta.

Te preguntarás, con ese mal carácter que tienes, con qué derecho me entrometo yo en los asuntos que tú prefieres mantener secretos. Mi querido Noel, hay una seria razón para que nos comuniquemos contigo desde esta casa. No sabes qué ha ocurrido en St. Crux desde que huiste para casarte y, aunque detesto escribir cartas, tendré que perder hoy una hora de caza para intentar explicártelo.

El día veintitrés del mes pasado, al almirante y a mí nos molestaron mientras tomábamos nuestro vino después de comer con el anuncio de que había llegado una visita inesperada a St. Crux. ¿Quién crees que era? ¡La señora Lecount!

Mi tío, con esa anticuada galantería suya propia de un solterón, que trata con igual respeto todo lo que lleve enaguas, abandonó la mesa inmediatamente para dar la bienvenida a la señora Lecount. Mientras yo dudaba si seguirle o no, el almirante puso un repentino fin a mis meditaciones llamándome con un grito. Yo corrí hacia el gabinete, y allí estaba tu desventurada ama de llaves, en el sofá, con todas las criadas de la casa alrededor, más muerta que viva. Había viajado de Inglaterra a Zurich y de Zurich a Inglaterra sin detenerse y parecía literalmente a las puertas de la muerte. Inmediatamente convine con mi tío en que la primera cosa que debíamos hacer era enviar en busca de un médico. Despachamos a un mozo de cuadra en el acto y, a petición de la señora Lecount, echamos a todas las criadas, en pleno, de la habitación.

Tan pronto como quedamos solos, la señora Lecount nos sorprendió con una pregunta singular. Quiso saber si tú habías recibido una carta que te había enviado a esta casa antes de abandonar Inglaterra. Cuando le dijimos que, a petición tuya, la carta había sido remitida adjunta a una carta dirigida a tu amigo, el señor Bygrave, se le puso el rostro ceniciento, y cuando añadimos que te habías marchado en compañía de ese mismo señor Bygrave, juntó las manos y nos miró fijamente como si hubiera perdido el

juicio. Su siguiente pregunta fue: «¿Dónde está ahora el señor Noel?». Sólo podíamos contestar de una manera. El señor Noel no nos había informado. Esta respuesta la dejó completamente atónita. «¿Se ha encaminado hacia su ruina?», dijo. «Se ha ido en compañía del canalla más grande de Inglaterra. ¡Tengo que encontrarlo! ¡Les digo que tengo que encontrar al señor Noel! Si no lo encuentro de inmediato, será demasiado tarde. ¡Se habrá casado!», espetó, totalmente fuera de sí. «¡Por mi honor juro que se habrá casado!» El almirante, imprudente quizá, pero con la mejor intención, le dijo que ya lo habías hecho. La señora Lecount dejó escapar un grito que hizo temblar los cristales de las ventanas y se desplomó en el sofá desmayada. El médico llegó entonces oportunamente y pronto le hizo recobrar el conocimiento. Pero la señora Lecount cayó enferma esa misma noche -ha empeorado de día en día desde entonces- y el último informe médico asegura que la fiebre que ha venido padeciendo va camino de afectarle el cerebro.

Bien, mi querido Noel, ni mi tío ni yo tenemos deseo alguno de meternos en tu vida privada. Naturalmente estamos asombrados por el extraordinario misterio que envuelve tu matrimonio y no podemos cerrar los ojos al hecho de que, en apariencia, tu ama de llaves tiene serios motivos personales para ver a la señora de Noel Vanstone con inquina y desconfianza, aunque nosotros estamos dispuestos a creer que la dama en cuestión no ha hecho nada para merecerlo. Sea cual sea el extraño malentendido que hay en tu casa, es asunto tuyo (si decides mantenerlo en secreto), no nuestro. Lo único que tenemos derecho a hacer es comunicarte lo que dice el médico. Su paciente delira; se niega a responder por su vida si sigue como hasta ahora; y cree -dado que ella no deja de hablar de su amo- que si pudieras venir aquí inmediatamente y ejercer tu influencia antes de que sea demasiado tarde, tu presencia podría servir para calmarla.

¿Qué me dices? ¿Emergerás de la oscuridad que te rodea y vendrás a St. Crux? Si se tratara de una criada cualquiera, podría comprender que dudaras en abandonar los goces de la luna de miel con el fin que aquí te propongo. Pero, mí querido amigo, la señora Lecount no es una criada cualquiera. Tienes una deuda de gratitud con ella por su fidelidad y su afecto, en vida de tu padre y ahora contigo, y si puedes calmar las inquietudes que parecen volver loca a esta desdichada mujer, creo realmente que deberías venir y hacerlo. Por supuesto no puedes dejar a la señora Noel Vanstone. No hay necesidad de tan cruel extremo. El almirante desea que te recuerde que es el amigo más antiguo que tienes y que esta casa está a disposición de tu esposa como siempre lo ha estado a la tuya. En este enorme y laberíntico lugar no ha de temer la cercanía con la habitación de la enferma y, pese a todas las rarezas de mi tío, estoy convencido de que no despreciará esta oferta de amistad.

¿He dicho ya que fui a Aldborough para intentar encontrar una pista de tu paradero? No puedo molestarme ahora en volver atrás para comprobarlo, de modo que, si ya te lo he dicho, te lo vuelvo a decir. Lo cierto es que en Aldborough conocí a una persona a la que tú conoces en cierta manera, al menos por referencias.

Tras acudir en vano a Sea-View, fui al hotel para preguntar por ti. La patrona no tenía información alguna que darme, pero en cuanto mencioné tu nombre me preguntó si éramos parientes, y cuando le expliqué que somos primos, me contó que en aquel momento se alojaba en el hotel una señorita que también se apellidaba Vanstone, que se hallaba muy angustiada por la desaparición de una pariente y que quizá podría serme útil -o yo a ella- si compartíamos los detalles de nuestros propósitos respectivos en Aldborough. Yo no tenía la menor idea de quién era, pero le envié mi tarjeta al azar; cinco minutos después, me hallé en presencia de una de las mujeres más encantadoras en las que se han posado estos ojos.

Nuestras primeras explicaciones me informaron de que conocía mi nombre de oídas. ¿Quién crees que era? La hija mayor de mi tío y el tuyo, Andrew Vanstone. En otro tiempo había oído a menudo a mi pobre madre hablar de su hermano Andrew, y conocía la triste historia de Combe-Raven. Pero nuestras familias, como tú bien sabes, siempre han estado distanciadas, así que jamás había visto a mi encantadora prima. Tiene los cabellos y los ojos oscuros, y los modales amables y reservados que siempre he admirado en una mujer. No quiero reabrir nuestra vieja desavenencia sobre la conducta de tu padre hacia esas dos hermanas, ni negar que su hermano Andrew pudiera

portarse mal con él. Estoy dispuesto a admitir que la elevada postura moral que adoptó tu padre en ese asunto es totalmente inalcanzable para un miserable pecador como yo, y no discutiré que mis hábitos manirrotos me incapacitan para opinar sobre el proceder de los demás en los aspectos pecuniarios. Pero, aun con todas estas consideraciones e inconvenientes, te diré una cosa, Noel. Si alguna vez llegas a ver a la mayor de las señoritas Vanstone, me arriesgo a profetizar que, por primera vez en tu vida, dudarás de que sea correcto seguir el ejemplo de tu padre.

Me contó su pequeña historia, pobrecilla, del modo más sencillo y sin afectación. Se encuentra ahora ocupando su segunda colocación como institutriz y, como de costumbre, yo, que conozco a todo el mundo, también conozco a esa familia. Son unos amigos de mi tío con los que no tiene relación últimamente, los Tyrrel de Portland Place, y tratan a la señorita Vanstone con tanta bondad y consideración como si fuera miembro de la familia. Una de sus antiguas sirvientas la había acompañado hasta Aldborough; el propósito de su viaje resultó ser el que me había contado la patrona. Los reveses familiares han tenido al parecer un efecto perjudicial sobre la hermana menor de la señorita Vanstone, que ha abandonado a sus allegados y falta de casa desde hace algún tiempo. Lo último que se sabía de ella era que había estado en Aldborough, por lo que, a su regreso del Continente con los Tyrrel, su hermana mayor se había encaminado de inmediato hacia el lugar para indagar su paradero.

Esto fue lo que me contó la señorita Vanstone. Me preguntó si tú habías visto a su hermana o si la señora Lecount sabía algo sobre ella, supongo que porque sabía que habíais estado en Aldborough. Por supuesto yo no podía decirle nada. Ella no entró en detalles y yo no podía tomarme la libertad de pedírselos. Me limité a dedicar ímprobos esfuerzos a ayudarla en sus pesquisas. Nuestro empeño fracasó estrepitosamente; nadie pudo darnos información alguna. Probamos con una descripción personal, claro está, y por extraño que parezca, la única señorita joven que había estado en Aldborough y que respondía a la descripción era ni más ni menos que ¡la señorita con la que te has casado! De no ser porque tenía un tío y una tía (que han abandonado el lugar), ¡hubiera empezado a sospechar que te habían casado con tu prima sin que lo supieras! ¿Es ésta la clave del misterio? No te enojes, ya sabes que siempre bromeo y no puedo evitar escribir con la misma ligereza con la que hablo. El resultado final fue que nuestras indagaciones quedaron sin fruto y regresé en el tren con la señorita Vanstone y su acompañante hasta la estación de aquí. Creo que iré a visitar a los Tyrrel la próxima vez que vaya a Londres. Desde luego he tratado a esa familia con una inexcusable negligencia.

¡Aquí me tienes, al final de la tercera hoja de papel de cartas! No empuño la pluma con frecuencia, pero cuando lo hago, convendrás conmigo en que no tengo prisa por volver a dejarla. Piensa lo que quieras del resto de mi carta, pero medita lo que te he dicho sobre la señora Lecount y recuerda que no disponemos de mucho tiempo.

Afectuosamente,

GEORGE BARTRAM

II

DE NORAH VANSTONE A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

Portland Place

Mi querida señorita Garth:

¡Más aflicción, más decepciones! Acabo de regresar de Aldborough sin hacer ningún descubrimiento. Magdalen sigue en paradero desconocido.

No puedo atribuir este nuevo fracaso de mis esperanzas a una falta de perseverancia o de perspicacia al realizar las pesquisas necesarias. Mi inexperiencia en tales asuntos recibió la ayuda, amabilísima e inesperada, del señor George Bartram. Por una extraña coincidencia, se hallaba también en Aldborough indagando el paradero del señor Noel Vanstone en el mismo momento en el que yo indagaba el de Magdalen. Me envió su tarjeta y al darme cuenta por el nombre de que era mi primo -si así puedo llamarlo-, pensé que no faltaría al decoro viéndole para pedirle consejo. Me abstuve de entrar en detalles, por el bien de Magdalen, y no hice alusión alguna a aquella carta de la señora Lecount que usted contestó por mí. Sólo le dije que Magdalen había desaparecido y que su último paradero conocido era Aldborough. La amabilidad que demostró el señor George Bartram dedicándose enteramente a ayudarme desafía toda descripción. Me trató, en mi desesperada situación, con una delicadeza y un respeto que recordaré con gratitud mucho después de que él mismo olvide quizá nuestro encuentro. Es bastante joven; yo diría que no pasa de los treinta. Su rostro y su figura me recordaron un poco el retrato de mi padre en Combe-Raven. Me refiero al retrato del comedor, el de mi padre cuando era joven.

Pese a la inutilidad de nuestras pesquisas, uno de sus resultados ha dejado en mí una impresión extraña y sobrecogedora.

Al parecer el señor Noel Vanstone se ha casado recientemente en circunstancias misteriosas con una señorita a la que conoció en Aldborough, de nombre Bygrave. Se ha ido con su esposa sin decirle a nadie salvo a su abogado cuál era su destino. Esto me lo contó el señor George Bartram, que intentaba hallar alguna pista sobre él con el fin de comunicarle la noticia de la grave enfermedad de su ama de llaves; ama de llaves que resulta ser la misma señora Lecount cuya carta contestó usted. Hasta aquí, me dirá usted, no hay nada que tenga por qué interesarnos a nosotras. Pero creo que se sorprenderá usted tanto como yo cuando le diga que la descripción de la señorita Bygrave que hacen los habitantes de Aldborough es alarmante e inexplicablemente parecida a la descripción de Magdalen. Este descubrimiento, considerado en relación con todas las circunstancias que nos son conocidas, ha tenido un efecto sobre mi ánimo que no tengo palabras para describir, que no me atrevo siquiera a admitir. ¡Por favor, venga a visitarme! Jamás me había sentido tan mal por Magdalen como me siento ahora. La incertidumbre debe de haber debilitado mis nervios de un extraño modo. Me he vuelto supersticiosa con las cosas más nimias. Esa semejanza accidental de una completa desconocida con Magdalen me llena a veces de terribles presentimientos, simplemente porque el nombre del señor Noel Vanstone se halla involucrado. Una vez más le ruego que venga a verme. Tengo muchas cosas que decirle que no puedo ni me atrevo a poner por escrito.

Con todo mi agradecimiento, afectuosamente,

NORAH

III

DEL SEÑOR JOHN LOSCOMBE (ABOGADO)

AL SEÑOR GEORGE BARTRAM

Lincoln's Inn, Londres.

6 de septiembre de 1847

Señor:

Acuso recibo de su nota adjuntando una carta dirigida a mi cliente, el señor Noel Vanstone, y solicitando que remita dicha carta a la dirección actual del señor Vanstone.

Desde que tuve el placer de comunicarme con usted en referencia a este asunto, mi posición con respecto a mi cliente ha cambiado por completo. Hace tres días recibí una carta en la que anunciaba su intención de cambiar su lugar de residencia al día siguiente, pero dejándome por completo ignorante del lugar al que tenía intención de mudarse. No he sabido nada de él desde entonces y, dado que previamente había recurrido a mí para obtener una suma de dinero mayor de lo habitual, no tendrá necesidad inmediata de volver a escribirme, suponiendo que desee ocultar a todos su lugar de residencia, incluyéndome a mí.

En estas circunstancias, creo que lo correcto es devolverle a usted la carta, asegurándole que si de nuevo estuviera en situación de remitírsela a su destinatario, se lo haría saber.

Su humilde servidor,

IV

DE NORAH VANSTONE A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

Portland Place

Mi querida señorita Garth:

Olvide la carta que le escribí ayer y todos los sombríos presagios que contiene. El correo de esta mañana me ha dado una nueva vida. Acabo de recibir una carta, dirigida a mí pero con la dirección de usted, que me ha remitido su hermana, dado que ayer se hallaba usted ausente. ¿Adivina quién me la envía? ¡Magdalen!

La carta es muy corta; parece escrita a toda prisa. Dice que ha soñado conmigo desde hace algunas noches y que los sueños le han hecho temer que me haya causado más aflicción por su culpa de la que merece. Me escribe por tanto para asegurarme que se halla sana y salva, que espera verme pronto y que tiene algo que decirme cuando nos encontremos que pondrá a prueba mi amor fraternal de un modo que no ha conocido hasta ahora. La carta no lleva fecha, pero el matasellos es de «Allonby», que, según he descubierto tras consultar el Gazeteer, es un pequeño pueblo costero de Cumberland. No me será posible contestar a su carta, pues Magdalen dice expresamente que está en vísperas de abandonar su actual residencia y que no le es posible decirme adonde va ni dejar instrucciones para que le remitan el correo.

En tiempos más felices, hubiera considerado esta carta muy lejos de ser satisfactoria y me hubiera alarmado seriamente por esa alusión a una futura revelación por su parte que pondrá a prueba mi amor de un modo que no he conocido hasta ahora. Pero, después de la incertidumbre que he sufrido, la felicidad de ver de nuevo su letra parece henchir mi corazón y alejar de él todos los demás sentimientos. No le envío a usted la carta porque sé que vendrá pronto a verme y quiero disfrutar el placer de ver cómo la lee.

Afectuosamente suya,

NORAH

P.D. El señor George Bartram ha visitado hoy a la señora Tyrrel. Ha insistido en ser presentado a los niños. Cuando se ha ido, la señora Tyrrel se ha reído con su buen humor característico y ha dicho que su deseo de ver a los niños era, en su opinión, deseo de verme a mí. ¡Puede usted imaginar cuánto ha mejorado mi estado de ánimo para permitirme usar la pluma y escribir sobre tales tonterías!

V

DE LA SEÑORA LECOUNT AL SEÑOR DE BLERIOT,

AGENTE COMERCIAL, LONDRES

St. Crux, 23 de octubre de 1847

Querido señor:

Me he demorado en darle las gracias por la amable carta en la que me promete su ayuda en amistoso recuerdo de las relaciones comerciales que existieron entre mi hermano y usted. Lo cierto es que abusé de mis fuerzas tras curar de una larga y peligrosa enfermedad, y durante los últimos diez días he sufrido una recaída. Ahora vuelvo a estar bien y puedo acometer el asunto que tan amablemente se ofreció usted a llevar a cabo por mí.

La persona cuyo lugar de residencia debo descubrir a toda costa es el señor Noel Vanstone. Durante muchos años he servido a ese caballero como ama de llaves y, no habiendo sido formalmente despedida, me considero aún a su servicio. Durante mi ausencia en el Continente, se casó en la intimidad en Aldborough, Suffolk, el pasado día dieciocho de agosto. Abandonó Aldborough ese mismo día llevándose con él a su esposa a algún lugar retirado que ha mantenido en secreto, salvo para su abogado, el señor Loscombe, de Lincoln's Inn. Tras un corto espacio de tiempo, volvió a mudarse el cuatro de septiembre, en esta ocasión sin informar al señor Loscombe de su nueva morada. A partir de entonces hasta el día de hoy, el abogado ha permanecido (o ha fingido permanecer) en la ignorancia sobre su paradero. Teniendo en cuenta estas circunstancias, se ha solicitado al señor Loscombe que informara sobre el lugar de residencia previo, dado que es sabido que el señor Vanstone se lo había comunicado. El señor Loscombe se ha negado a acceder a esta petición alegando la falta de permiso formal para revelar las acciones de su cliente después de abandonar Aldborough. Todos estos detalles los he recibido por medio de la persona que ha mantenido correspondencia con el señor Loscombe, el sobrino del caballero al que pertenece esta casa y cuya caridad me ha dado asilo bajo su propio techo durante mi grave enfermedad.

Creo que las razones que han inducido al señor Noel Vanstone a mantenerse oculto junto con su esposa están enteramente relacionadas conmigo. En primer lugar, él es consciente de que las circunstancias en las que se ha casado son tales que me dan derecho a juzgarlo con justa indignación. En segundo lugar, sabe que mis leales servicios, prestados durante un período de veinte años a su padre y a él mismo, le impiden, por un sentido de la más elemental decencia, arrojarme al mundo desvalida y sin una renta para el resto de mis días. Él es el más mezquino de los hombres y su esposa es la más vil de las mujeres. Mientras él pueda evitarlo, no cumplirá con la obligación que tiene para conmigo, y no me cabe duda de que su esposa le alentará, reforzando su ingratitud.

He resuelto hallarlo con un propósito que expongo brevemente. Su matrimonio le ha expuesto a consecuencias que un hombre con un valor diez veces mayor que el suyo no afrontaría sin acobardarse. Él nada sabe de esas consecuencias. Su esposa sí las conoce y a él lo mantiene en la ignorancia. Yo las sé y puedo revelárselas. Su seguridad frente al peligro que lo amenaza depende por completo de mí, y pagará el precio de su rescate hasta el último penique de la deuda que en justicia me corresponde, ni más ni menos.

Le he expuesto mis intenciones sin reservas, como me pedía. Sabe por qué quiero encontrar a ese hombre y lo que pretendo hacer cuando lo encuentre. Dejo a su

comprensión que responda a la seria pregunta que aún nos resta: ¿cómo hallarlo? Si puede dar con una primera pista tras su partida de Aldborough, creo que unas prudentes pesquisas bastarán para lo demás. La apariencia personal de la esposa y el extraordinario contraste entre el marido y ella sin duda habrán atraído la atención, y los recordará todo desconocido que los vea.

Cuando tenga a bien mandarme su respuesta, diríjala por favor a: «A la atención de la señora Lecount, almirante Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, cerca de Ossory, Essex».

Con todo mi agradecimiento, atentamente,

VIRGINIE LECOUNT

VI

DEL SEÑOR DE BLERIOT A LA SEÑORA LECOUNT

Dark's Building, Kingsland,

25 de octubre de 1847

Personal y confidencial

Querida señora:

Me apresuro a responder a su atenta carta con fecha del sábado. Ciertas circunstancias me han permitido actuar en su favor gracias a un amigo mío que posee gran experiencia en la dirección de investigaciones privadas de todo tipo. Le consulté el caso de usted (sin mencionar nombres) y me alegra poder informarle de que mis puntos de vista y los suyos sobre la línea de conducta correcta coinciden en todos los detalles.

Tanto mi amigo como yo opinamos que poco o nada puede hacerse para hallar el rastro de las personas que menciona hasta que se descubra primero el lugar en el que residieron temporalmente tras abandonar Aldborough. Si se puede hacer, cuanto antes se consiga mejor. A juzgar por su carta, habrán pasado varias semanas desde que el abogado recibió la comunicación de que habían cambiado de domicilio. Dado que ambos son personas de aspecto singular, es probable que los desconocidos que puedan haberles ayudado durante sus viajes no los hayan olvidado aún. No obstante, sería deseable apresurarse.

Debería usted considerar la posibilidad de que hayan comunicado la dirección que necesitamos a alguna otra persona además del abogado. Quizá el marido escribiera a algún miembro de su familia, o la esposa escribiera a algún miembro de la suya. Tanto mi amigo como yo opinamos que esta última posibilidad es la más probable. Si tiene usted algún medio de acceder a la familia de la esposa, le recomendamos vivamente que haga uso de él. En caso contrario, por favor, indíquenos los nombres de sus parientes cercanos o de amigas íntimas que conozca, y nosotros procuraremos acceder a ellos por usted.

En cualquier caso, le pedimos que nos envíe de inmediato una descripción personal lo más exacta posible de ambos cónyuges. Podríamos requerir su ayuda en este importante punto en cuestión de minutos. Por tanto, facilítenos la descripción a vuelta de correo. Mientras tanto, nosotros intentaremos averiguar si puede obtenerse en secreto alguna información en la oficina del señor Loscombe. Seguramente el abogado está por completo fuera de nuestro alcance. Pero si podemos negociar ventajosamente con alguno de sus pasantes en condiciones que no resulten gravosas para sus recursos monetarios, puede estar segura de que aprovechará esa oportunidad,

su leal servidor,

ALFRED DE BLERIOT

VII

DEL SEÑOR PENDRIL A NORAH VANSTONE

Serle Street, 27 de octubre de 1847

Mi querida señorita Vanstone:

Una señora, de nombre Lecount (anteriormente vinculada al servicio del señor Noel Vanstone en calidad de ama de llaves) se ha presentado en mi despacho esta mañana y me ha pedido que le proporcionara la dirección de usted. Le he rogado que me excusara de otorgarle inmediatamente su petición y que viniera a verme mañana por la mañana, momento en que podría darle una respuesta definitiva.

Mi vacilación en este asunto no procede de suspicacia alguna sobre la persona de la señora Lecount, pues nada sé de ella que vaya en su detrimento. Pero al hacerme esta petición, ha manifestado que el propósito de la entrevista solicitada era el de hablar con usted en privado con respecto a su hermana. Perdóneme por admitir que decidí no darle la dirección en cuanto oí esas palabras. ¿Será usted indulgente con su viejo amigo que le desea sinceramente el mayor de los bienes? No se lo tome a mal si expreso mi total desaprobación por permitir que la mezclen en el futuro, sea cual sea el pretexto, con las acciones de su hermana.

No quiero añadir más para no afligirla, pero mi interés por su bienestar es demasiado grande y mi admiración por la paciencia con que ha soportado usted todas sus penas es demasiado sincera para decir menos.

Si no puedo convencerla para que siga mi consejo, no tiene más que decírmelo y la señora Lecount sabrá su dirección mañana. En este caso (que no puedo considerar más que con la mayor reticencia), permítame al menos recomendarle que ponga como condición la presencia de la señorita Garth durante la entrevista. En todo lo que concierne a su hermana, es posible que precise del consejo y de la protección de una vieja amiga contra sus propios y generosos impulsos. Yo mismo la hubiera ayudado en esto de haber podido, pero la señora Lecount me dio a entender que el tema sobre el que quería hablar era de una naturaleza demasiado delicada para permitir mi presencia. Tenga o no validez real esta objeción, no puede aplicarse a la señorita Garth, que las ha educado a ustedes desde la infancia. Se lo repito, por tanto; si ve usted a la señora Lecount, que sea en compañía de la señorita Garth.

Le saluda atentamente,

WlLLIAM PENDRIL

VIII

DE NORAH VANSTONE AL SEÑOR PENDRIL

Portland Place, miércoles

Mi querido señor Pendril:

Por favor, no piense que no agradezco su bondad. ¡Le aseguro que no soy una ingrata! Pero debo ver a la señora Lecount. Cuando me escribió usted no sabía que yo había recibido unas líneas de Magdalen, no para decirme dónde está, sino para expresar la esperanza de que nos veamos pronto. Quizá la señora Lecount tenga algo que decirme sobre ese mismo punto. Aunque no fuera así, mi hermana -haga lo que haga- sigue siendo mi hermana. No puedo abandonarla; no puedo dar la espalda a nadie que venga a verme en su nombre. Ya sabe usted, querido señor Pendril, que he sido siempre obstinada a este respecto, y usted siempre ha tenido paciencia conmigo. Permítame deberle un nuevo favor que no podré devolverle nunca, ¡y siga teniendo paciencia conmigo!

¿Es necesario que le diga que acepto de buena gana la parte de su consejo que se refiere a la señorita Garth? Le he escrito ya rogándole que venga mañana por la tarde a las cuatro. Cuando vea usted a la señora Lecount, comuníquele por favor que la señorita Garth me acompañará y que nos encontrará a ambas dispuestas a recibirla aquí mañana a las cuatro.

Con todo mi agradecimiento,

NORAH VANSTONE

IX

DEL SEÑOR DE BLERIOT A LA SEÑORA LECOUNT

Dark's Buildings, 28 de octubre

Personal

Querida señora:

Uno de los pasantes del señor Loscombe se ha dejado convencer por una pequeña cantidad de dinero y ha mencionado una circunstancia que podría ser importante que usted conociera.

Hace casi un mes, casualmente el pasante en cuestión tuvo la oportunidad de echar un vistazo al interior de uno de los documentos que había sobre la mesa de su jefe y que había atraído su atención por una leve peculiaridad en la forma y color del papel. Sólo tuvo tiempo, durante la ausencia momentánea del señor Loscombe, de satisfacer su curiosidad examinando el principio y el final del documento. En el principio leyó la fórmula habitual de un testamento. Al final descubrió la firma del señor Noel Vanstone con los nombres de dos testigos y fecha (de eso está completamente seguro) del pasado treinta de septiembre.

Antes de que el pasante tuviera tiempo de hacer más averiguaciones, regresó su jefe, ordenó los papeles de su mesa y guardó cuidadosamente el testamento en la caja fuerte destinada a la custodia de los documentos del señor Noel Vanstone. Hemos averiguado que el señor Loscombe se ausentó de su oficina a finales de septiembre. Si se hallaba entonces ocupado en supervisar la legalización del testamento de su cliente -lo que es muy posible-, es lógico pensar que conocía la dirección del señor Vanstone tras el cambio de residencia del cuatro de septiembre, y si usted no puede hacer nada por su parte, podría ser deseable que nosotros vigiláramos al señor Loscombe por la nuestra. En cualquier caso, sabemos con certeza que el señor Noel Vanstone ha hecho testamento después de casarse. Puede usted sacar sus propias conclusiones de ese hecho. Por mi parte, aguardo sus prontas noticias y quedo

su leal servidor,

ALFRED DE BLERIOT

X

DE LA SEÑORITA GARTH AL SEÑOR PENDRIL

Portland Place, 28 de octubre

Mi querido señor:

La señora Lecount acaba de dejarnos. Si no fuera demasiado tarde, desearía con todo mi corazón que Norah hubiera seguido su consejo y se hubiera negado a recibirla.

Le escribo con el ánimo tan conturbado que no me será posible ofrecerle un relato claro y completo de la entrevista. Sólo puedo contarle brevemente lo que ha hecho la señora Lecount y cuál es nuestra situación actual. El resto habrá de esperar a que me haya serenado y hasta que pueda hablar con usted personalmente.

Recordará que le informé sobre la carta que la señora Lecount había dirigido a Norah desde Aldborough y que yo respondí en su ausencia. Cuando la señora Lecount ha aparecido hoy, sus primera palabras nos han anunciado que venía para hablar del mismo tema. Si no recuerdo mal, esto es lo que ha dicho, dirigiéndose a Norah:

- Hace un tiempo le escribí sobre su hermana, señorita Vanstone, y la señorita Garth tuvo la amabilidad de contestar mi carta. Lo que temía en aquel momento se ha hecho realidad. Su hermana ha desafiado todos mis esfuerzos por detenerla; ha desaparecido en compañía de mi amo, el señor Noel Vanstone, y se halla ahora en una peligrosa posición que puede llevarla a la ignominia y la ruina en cualquier momento. Yo quiero recuperar a mi amo, usted quiere salvar a su hermana. Dígame, pues no disponemos de tiempo, ¿ha tenido noticias de ella?

Norah respondió lo mejor que supo en aquel momento de terror y angustia:

- He recibido una carta, pero no llevaba dirección alguna.

La señora Lecount preguntó:

- ¿No llevaba matasellos el sobre?

Norah dijo:

- Sí, de Allonby.

- Allonby es mejor que nada -dijo la señora Lecount-. Puede que Allonby sirva para encontrar su rastro. ¿Dónde está Allonby?

Norah contestó. Todo ocurrió en un momento. Yo estaba demasiado perpleja y sorprendida para intervenir antes, pero me tranquilicé lo suficiente para intervenir entonces.

- No nos ha dado usted ningún detalle -dije-. Únicamente nos ha asustado; no nos ha dicho nada.

- Oirá usted los detalles, señora -dijo la señora Lecount-, y usted y la señorita Vanstone juzgarán por sí mismas si las he asustado sin motivo.

Tras estas palabras, inició de inmediato una larga exposición que no puedo -casi diría que no me atrevo- a repetir. Comprenderá usted el horror que sentimos ambas cuando

le explique el final. Si hemos de creer lo que afirma la señora Lecount, Magdalen ha llevado su insensato propósito de recuperar la fortuna de su padre hasta el último y desesperado extremo de casarse con el hijo de Michael Vanstone con un nombre falso. Su marido sigue persuadido en este momento de que su apellido de soltera era Bygrave y de que es realmente la sobrina de un bribón que la ayudó en su impostura y al que he reconocido por la descripción como el capitán Wragge.

Le ahorraré los motivos mercenarios, que la señora Lecount confesó fríamente cuando se levantó para dejarnos, de su deseo de hallar a su amo y ponerle al corriente de todo. Le ahorraré las insinuaciones que dejó caer sobre el propósito de Magdalen al contraer ese matrimonio infame. El único objetivo de mí carta es implorarle que me ayude a calmar la angustia de Norah. La conmoción que ha recibido al oír esta noticia sobre su hermana no es la peor consecuencia de lo ocurrido. Se ha convencido a sí misma de que las respuestas que dio inocentemente, llevada por la congoja, a las preguntas de la señora Lecount sobre la carta, las respuestas que le arrancó bajo la súbita presión de la confusión y la alarma, pudiera utilizarlas en perjuicio de Magdalen la mujer que la asustó deliberadamente para sonsacarle la información. Sólo podré impedir que Norah emprenda alguna acción desesperada por su cuenta -una acción por culpa de la cual pudiera perder la amistad y protección de las excelentes personas con las que ahora vive- recordándole que si la señora Lecount encuentra a su amo gracias al matasellos de la carta, nosotros podemos encontrar a Magdalen al mismo tiempo y por el mismo medio. Por encima de cualquier reparo que pueda anteponer personalmente a la renovación de los esfuerzos por rescatar a esa desdichada joven, que tan lamentablemente fracasaron en York, le ruego que tome ahora las mismas medidas que tomó entonces, en beneficio de Norah. Envíeme la única garantía que conseguirá apaciguarla: la garantía, escrita de su puño y letra, de que se ha emprendido la búsqueda por nuestra parte. Si lo hace usted, puede confiar en que yo me interpondré entre las dos hermanas cuando llegue el momento y en que defenderé la paz, el carácter y la futura prosperidad de Norah a cualquier precio.

Le saluda atentamente,

HARRIET GARTH

XI

DE LA SEÑORA LECOUNT AL SEÑOR DE BLERIOT

28 de octubre

Querido señor:

He hallado la pista que me pedía. La señora de Noel Vanstone ha escrito a su hermana. La carta no contenía dirección alguna, pero el matasellos era de Allonby, en Cumberland. En Allonby, por tanto, han de empezar las pesquisas. Obra ya en su poder la descripción personal de ambos cónyuges. Le recomiendo encarecidamente que no se demore un solo instante. Si le es posible enviar a alguien a Cumberland a la recepción de esta carta, le ruego que lo haga.

Tengo algo más que decirle antes de concluir esta nota sobre el descubrimiento en la oficina del señor Loscombe.

No me sorprende oír que el señor Noel Vanstone ha hecho testamento después de su boda, y no es difícil adivinar a favor de quién lo ha hecho. Si consigo encontrar a mi amo, ¡reto a esa persona a que coja el dinero si es capaz! Desde que recibí la carta de usted se me ha ocurrido un medio de resolver este asunto, pero mi ignorancia de los pormenores y las complejidades de la ley me hace dudar aún de si mi idea podrá ser llevada a la práctica con rapidez y seguridad. No conozco a ningún profesional en quien pueda confiar en este delicado y peligroso asunto. ¿Podría ayudarme usted con su amplia experiencia? Iré a verle a su oficina mañana a las dos a fin de pedirle consejo. Es sumamente importante que, cuando vuelva a ver al señor Noel Vanstone, esté preparada de antemano sobre la cuestión del testamento.

Su agradecida servidora,

XII

DEL SEÑOR PENDRIL A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

Serle Street, 29 de octubre

Querida señorita Garth:

Dispongo tan sólo de un momento para manifestarle el profundo pesar con el que he leído su carta. Las circunstancias que la han llevado a insistir en su petición y las razones expuestas son suficientes para acallar cualquier reparo que pudiera poner a la salida que usted propone. Hoy saldrá en dirección a Allonby una persona de toda confianza a la que he dado instrucciones personalmente, y tan pronto como reciba noticias suyas, se las haré llegar a usted por mensajero. Dígaselo a la señorita Vanstone y transmítale, por favor, mi sincero pesar y mis respetos.

Le saluda atentamente,

WILLIAM PENDRIL

XIII

DEL SEÑOR DE BLERIOT A LA SEÑORA LECOUNT

Dark's Buildings, 1 de noviembre

Querida señora:

Tengo el placer de informarle de que se ha producido el descubrimiento con muchas menos dificultades de las que había previsto.

Se ha seguido el rastro del señor y la señora Noel Vanstone a través del estuario del Solway hasta Dumfries, y desde allí a una casa de campo a unos cuantos kilómetros del pueblo, a orillas del Nith. La dirección exacta es Baliol Cottage, cerca de Dumfries.

Si bien esta información se ha obtenido fácilmente, las circunstancias han sido por cierto singulares.

Antes de abandonar Allonby, mis empleados descubrieron con gran sorpresa por su parte que había un desconocido en el lugar haciendo las mismas indagaciones que ellos. A falta de instrucciones que previeran semejante contingencia, obraron según su parecer. Considerando al hombre en cuestión como un intruso en el asunto que tenían entre manos, cuyo éxito podía privarlos del reconocimiento y la recompensa de efectuar el descubrimiento, aprovecharon su superioridad en número y el hecho de haber llegado los primeros, y engañaron cautelosamente al desconocido antes de avanzar en sus propias investigaciones. Estoy en posesión de los detalles de sus acciones, detalles con los que no es necesario que la moleste. El resultado es que, con habilidad, mis hombres dirigieron los pasos de esa persona, quienquiera que sea, de vuelta hacia el sur, siguiendo una pista falsa, antes de que ellos cruzaran el estuario.

Menciono este hecho dado que quizá esté usted más capacitada que yo para hallar la clave y porque es posible que sea de una naturaleza que le induzca a precipitar su viaje.

Su leal servidor,

XIV

DE LA SEÑORA LECOUNT AL SEÑOR DE BLERIOT

1 de noviembre

Querido señor:

Unas líneas para decirle que acabo de recibir su carta en mi alojamiento de Londres. Creo que sé quién envió al desconocido a indagar en Allonby. Poco importa. Antes de que descubra su error, estaré en Dumfries. Tengo hecho el equipaje y partiré hacia el norte en el próximo tren.

Con mi más sincero agradecimiento,

VIRGINIE LECOUNT

LA QUINTA ESCENA

Baliol Cottage, Dumfries

CAPÍTULO I

Hacia las once de la mañana del tres de noviembre, la mesa del desayuno de Baliol Cottage presentaba ese aspecto fundamentalmente abandonado que produce una comida en estado de transición; es decir, una comida preparada para dos personas que una de ellas ya se ha comido y a la que aún no se ha acercado la otra. Voraz ha de ser el apetito que pueda contemplar sin un fugaz desaliento la cáscara de huevo rota, el pescado con media espina fuera, las migas en el plato y el poso en la taza. Sin duda hay una sabia resignación a esas flaquezas de la naturaleza humana que deben ser respetadas y no censuradas, en la comprensiva rapidez con que los empleados de los locales públicos borran toda huella del cliente pasado de la vista del cliente presente. Aunque su predecesor pueda haber sido la esposa amada o el hijo del alma, ningún hombre se encuentra con los rastros de un desaparecido comensal en su mesa sin una pasajera sensación de agravio en relación con la idea de su propia comida.

Una impresión parecida invadió el ánimo del señor Noel Vanstone cuando entró poco después de las once en la solitaria salita de Baliol Cottage, donde se había servido el desayuno. Miró la mesa ceñudo y tocó la campanilla con expresión de repugnancia.

- Despeja todo esto -dijo, cuando apareció la criada-. ¿Se ha ido la señora?

- Sí, señor, hace casi una hora.

- ¿Está abajo Louisa?

- Sí, señor.

- Cuando hayas limpiado la mesa, envíame a Louisa.

Noel Vanstone se acercó a la ventana. La momentánea irritación abandonó su rostro, pero dejó una expresión que permaneció, una expresión de descontento que lo consumía. Exteriormente, el matrimonio le había cambiado para peor. Sus marchitas mejillas empezaban a hundirse, su frágil y menuda figura empezaba ya a encorvarse levemente. La antigua delicadeza de su cutis había desaparecido; sólo quedaba la palidez enfermiza. No llevaba ya las finas guías de su rubio bigote pragmáticamente enceradas y retorcidas en sendos bucles; los débiles extremos plumosos colgaban con mansedumbre sobre las quejumbrosas comisuras de la boca. Si se hubieran contado las diez o doce semanas transcurridas desde la boda a tenor de su aspecto, bien pudieran haberse tomado por diez o doce años. Permaneció junto a la ventana arrancando hojas distraídamente de un tiesto de brezo colocado frente a ella y tarareando con tristeza el melancólico fragmento de una melodía.

La vista desde la ventana abarcaba el cauce del Nith en un meandro del río a unos cuantos kilómetros más allá de Dumfries. Aquí y allá, a través de claros invernales en la orilla arbolada, el ojo tropezaba con las amplias y llanas extensiones cultivadas del valle. Por el río navegaban las barcas y los carros avanzaban pesadamente por la carretera en dirección a Dumfries. El cielo estaba despejado, el sol de noviembre calentaba tan agradablemente como si el año fuera dos meses más joven, y la vista, famosa en Escocia por su alegre y pacífico encanto, ofrecía el mejor de los aspectos que

podía adoptar en invierno. Según todas las apariencias, el señor Noel Vanstone la habría encontrado igualmente atractiva de haber estado oculta por la niebla o bañada por la lluvia. Aguardó junto a la ventana hasta que oyó la llamada de Louisa en la puerta; entonces se dio la vuelta con malhumor hacia la mesa del desayuno y le dijo que entrara.

- Sírveme el té -dijo-. Yo no tengo ni idea. Me han dejado aquí abandonado. Nadie me ayuda.

La discreta Louisa obedeció en silencio sumisamente.

- ¿Ha dejado tu señora algún recado para mí antes de marcharse? -preguntó él.

- Ninguno en particular, señor. La señora ha dicho sólo que se le haría muy tarde si esperaba más tiempo para desayunar.

- ¿No ha dicho nada más?

- Junto a la portezuela del carruaje, señor, me ha dicho que con toda probabilidad volvería dentro de una semana.

- ¿Estaba de buen humor junto a la portezuela del carruaje?

- No, señor. Me ha parecido que la señora estaba muy nerviosa e intranquila. ¿Puedo hacer algo más por usted, señor?

- No lo sé. Aguarda un minuto.

Noel Vanstone procedió a desayunar con aire descontento. Louisa aguardó con resignación junto a la puerta.

- Creo que la señora ha estado de mal humor últimamente -prosiguió él, con un repentino ataque de susceptibilidad.

- La señora no ha estado muy animada, señor.

- ¿Qué quiere decir que no ha estado animada? No te andes con rodeos. ¿Es que no pinto nada en esta casa? ¿Se me va a dejar a ciegas en todo? ¿Acaso la señora puede irse por asuntos personales dejándome en casa como a un niño y yo ni siquiera puedo hacer una pregunta sobre ella? ¿Habré de soportar que una criada me salga con evasivas? ¡No pienso tolerarlo! ¿No ha estado muy animada? ¿Qué quiere decir que no ha estado animada?

- Sólo quería decir que la señora no estaba de buen humor, señor.

- Entonces, ¿por qué no lo decías? ¿No conoces acaso el valor de las palabras? En ocasiones se producen las más terribles consecuencias por no conocer el valor de las palabras. ¿Te ha dicho la señora que se iba a Londres?

- Sí, señor.

- ¿Qué has pensado cuando la señora te ha dicho que se iba a Londres? ¿Te ha extrañado que se fuera sin mí?

- No me he tomado la libertad de pensar que fuera extraño, señor. ¿Puedo hacer algo más por usted, por favor, señor?

- ¿Cómo está la mañana ahí fuera? ¿Hace calor? ¿Da el sol en el jardín?

- Sí, señor.

- ¿Has visto tú misma que el sol da en el jardín?

- Sí, señor.

- Tráeme el gabán; saldré a dar un paseíto. ¿Lo ha cepillado mi ayuda de cámara? ¿Le has visto cepillarlo tú misma? ¿Qué pretendes diciéndome que lo ha cepillado si tú no lo has visto? Déjame mirarle los faldones. Si hay una sola mota de polvo en los faldones ¡despediré al ayuda de cámara! Ayúdame a ponérmelo.

Louisa le ayudó a ponerse el gabán y le entregó el sombrero. Noel Vanstone salió de casa con irritación. El gabán era demasiado grande (había pertenecido a su padre); el sombrero era demasiado grande (lo había comprado él; era una ganga, aunque no le quedaba bien). Se hallaba sumergido en el gabán y el sombrero; parecía especialmente menudo, frágil y desagradable cuando enfiló despacio el sendero del jardín bajo el sol invernal. El sendero bajaba en suave pendiente desde la parte posterior de la casa hasta la orilla del río, de la que estaba separado por una empalizada de poca altura. Tras pasearse con lentitud de un extremo a otro del sendero durante un rato, se detuvo junto a la empalizada e, inclinándose sobre ella, contempló con apatía el suave discurrir de la corriente.

Sus pensamientos seguían enzarzados en la primera pregunta que había hecho a Louisa con preocupación; seguía dándole vueltas a las circunstancias en las que su esposa había abandonado la casa aquella mañana y la falta de respeto hacia él que suponía el modo en que se había ido. Cuanto más pensaba en el agravio, más agudo era su resentimiento. Era una persona de gran sensibilidad en lo que concernía a cualquier ofensa contra su sentido de la propia importancia. Poco a poco su cabeza fue declinando sobre sus brazos, apoyados en la empalizada, y con la profunda sinceridad de la mortificación, suspiró amargamente.

El suspiro recibió respuesta de una voz junto a él.

- Era usted más feliz conmigo, señor -dijo la voz, con un tono de afectuoso pesar.

Noel Vanstone alzó la vista con un chillido -literalmente un chillido- y se encontró frente a la señora Lecount.

¿Era aquél su espectro o la mujer? Tenía los cabellos blancos, el rostro demacrado; miraba con ojos grandes, brillantes y ojerosos sobre las mejillas hundidas. Estaba marchita y vieja. El vestido caía en bolsas alrededor de su consumida figura; no quedaba el menor rastro de su rolliza belleza otoñal. La determinación silenciosa e impenetrable, la voz suave y el tono zalamero eran las únicas reliquias del pasado que la enfermedad y el sufrimiento habían dejado en la señora Lecount.

- Tranquilícese, señor Noel -dijo la señora Lecount afablemente-. No tiene motivos para alarmarse al verme. Cuando le he preguntado, su criada me ha dicho que estaba usted en el jardín, y he venido a buscarlo. Le he seguido la pista hasta aquí, señor, sin resentimiento hacia usted, ni deseos de angustiarle siquiera con la sombra de un reproche. He venido aquí por lo que ha sido y es la ocupación de mi vida: servirle a usted.

Noel Vanstone se recobró un tanto, pero seguía privado del habla. Se agarró con fuerza a la empalizada y miró a la señora Lecount fijamente.

- Intente grabar en su cerebro, señor, lo que voy a decirle -prosiguió la señora Lecount-. No he venido aquí como enemiga, sino como amiga. He sufrido la dura prueba de la enfermedad; he sufrido la dura prueba de la angustia. Nada queda de mí salvo mi corazón. Mi corazón le perdona; mi corazón me pone a su servicio en esta hora de gran necesidad, necesidad que usted aún ha de sentir. Cójase de mi brazo, señor Noel. Un paseíto al sol le ayudará a recobrarse.

La señora Lecount enlazó la mano de Noel Vanstone en torno a su brazo y le condujo lentamente por el sendero hacia la casa. Antes de que hubiera estado cinco minutos en su compañía, había vuelto a tomar plena posesión de él por derecho propio.

- Ahora hacia abajo otra vez, señor Noel -dijo-. Lentamente cuesta abajo, al agradable calor del sol. Tengo muchas cosas que decirle, señor, que usted no espera oír de mí. Permítame hacerle primero una pequeña pregunta de tipo familiar. En la puerta de la

casa me han dicho que la señora de Noel Vanstone se ha ido de viaje. ¿Estará fuera mucho tiempo?

La mano de su amo tembló sobre su brazo cuando ella formuló esta pregunta. En lugar de responder, Noel Vanstone hizo un débil intento de defenderse. Las primeras palabras que pronunció las suscitaba la primera sensación recobrada, la sensación de que su ama de llaves lo tenía bajo custodia. Intentó reconciliarse con la señora Lecount.

- Siempre he tenido la intención de hacer algo por usted -dijo con tono adulador-. Hubiera tenido noticias mías dentro de poco. ¡Por mi honor, le doy mi palabra, Lecount, de que hubiera tenido noticias mías dentro de poco!

- No lo dudo, señor -replicó la señora Lecount-. Pero por el momento no se preocupe por mí. Usted y sus intereses son primero.

- ¿Cómo ha llegado hasta aquí? -preguntó él mirándola atónito-. ¿Cómo ha conseguido encontrarme?

- Es una larga historia, señor; se la contaré en otro momento. Baste con decir por ahora que le he encontrado. ¿Volverá hoy la señora de Noel Vanstone? Un poco más alto, señor; apenas le oigo. ¡Vaya, vaya! ¡No volverá hasta dentro de una semana! ¿Y adonde ha ido? ¿A Londres, dice? ¿Y para qué? No es por curiosidad, señor Noel; le hago estas preguntas acuciada por la necesidad. ¿Por qué su esposa se ha ido sola a Londres, dejándole aquí?

Se hallaban de nuevo junto a la empalizada cuando la señora Lecount hizo esta última pregunta, y aguardaron, apoyados en ella, a que Noel Vanstone la contestara. La insistencia de la señora Lecount en asegurarle que no le guardaba rencor produjo su efecto; Noel Vanstone empezaba a serenarse. La vieja costumbre de dirigir, impotente, todas sus quejas a su ama de llaves volvió con la reaparición de ésta; volvió insidiosamente en compañía de aquella impaciencia obsesiva por hablar de sus agravios que le había delatado en la mesa del desayuno y que había revelado a la doncella de su mujer la herida infligida en su vanidad.

- No puedo responder por la señora de Noel Vanstone -dijo con rencor-. La señora de Noel Vanstone no me ha tratado con el respeto que me debe. Ha dado por supuesto mi permiso y sólo ha considerado conveniente decirme que el propósito de su viaje era visitar a sus amigos de Londres. Se ha ido esta mañana sin despedirse de mí. Obra a su antojo, como si yo no fuera nadie; me trata como a un niño. Aunque no se lo crea, Lecount, ni siquiera sé quiénes son sus amigos. Estoy completamente a ciegas. He de suponer que sus amigos de Londres son sus tíos.

La señora Lecount meditó la cuestión en silencio con la ayuda de lo que había conseguido averiguar en Londres. Pronto llegó a la conclusión obvia. Después de escribir a su hermana en primer lugar, con toda probabilidad Magdalen había seguido a la carta en persona. No cabía duda de que los amigos a los que pensaba visitar en Londres eran su hermana y la señorita Garth.

- No son sus tíos, señor -dijo la señora Lecount serenamente-. ¡Le diré un secreto! No tiene tíos. Otro paseíto antes de que me explique, otro paseíto para que se le tranquilicen los ánimos.

Lo tomó bajo su custodia una vez más y lo condujo de vuelta a la casa.

- ¡Señor Noel! -exclamó la señora Lecount, deteniéndose de pronto a mitad de camino-. ¿Sabe cuál ha sido el mayor daño que se ha hecho a sí mismo en toda su vida? Yo se lo diré. El peor daño fue enviarme a mí a Zurich.

La mano de Noel Vanstone empezó a temblar sobre el brazo del ama de llaves una vez más.

- ¡Yo no lo hice! -exclamó lastimosamente-. Todo fue obra del señor Bygrave.

- ¿Reconoce usted, señor, que el señor Bygrave me engañó? -prosiguió la señora Lecount-. Me alegra oírlo. Más dispuesto estará usted a hacer el siguiente descubrimiento que le aguarda, el de que el señor Bygrave le ha engañado a usted. Él no está aquí ahora para deslizarse entre mis dedos y en este lugar no soy la desvalida mujer que era en Aldborough. ¡Gracias a Dios! -El ama de llaves pronunció esta devota exclamación con los dientes apretados. Todo el odio que tenía al capitán Wragge brotó siseante de sus labios en esas dos palabras-. Hágame el favor de sujetar mi bolsa de viaje por un lado mientras yo la abro y saco una cosa.

El interior de la bolsa desveló una serie de papeles pulcramente doblados, ordenados y numerados. La señora Lecount cogió uno de los papeles y volvió a cerrar la bolsa con un fuerte chasquido del muelle.

- En Aldborough, señor Noel, sólo tenía mi opinión para sustentar mis teorías -señaló-. Mi opinión no era nada frente a la juventud y la belleza de la señorita Bygrave y el ingenio del señor Bygrave. Mi única esperanza estribaba en atacar su enamoramiento con pruebas, y en aquel momento no disponía de ellas. ¡Ahora las tengo! Estoy armada de pruebas en todos los sentidos, estoy llena de pruebas de la cabeza a los pies, rompo mi forzado silencio y con el énfasis de mis pruebas hablo. ¿Conoce usted esta letra, señor?

Noel Vanstone se echó hacia atrás al ver el papel que le tendía.

- No comprendo nada -dijo con nerviosismo-. No sé qué quiere ni qué quiere decir.

La señora Lecount le obligó a coger el papel.

- Sabrá lo que quiero decir, señor, si me presta un momento de atención -dijo-. El día siguiente a su partida a St. Crux, conseguí acceder a la casa del señor Bygrave y tuve una charla en privado con la esposa del señor Bygrave. Esa charla me proporcionó los medios para convencerle a usted que había estado buscando durante semanas. Le escribí una carta contándoselo, le escribí para decirle que perdería mi puesto a su servicio y mis expectativas de su generosidad si no probaba a mi regreso desde Suiza que mis sospechas sobre la señorita Bygrave eran ciertas. Le mandé la carta a St. Crux y la eché al correo yo misma. Bien, señor Noel, lea el papel que le he obligado a coger. Es la declaración escrita del almirante Bartram de que mi carta llegó a St. Crux y de que él se la mandó adjunta en una carta al señor Bygrave a petición de usted. ¿Le entregó el señor Bygrave esa carta? ¡No se altere, señor! Una palabra bastará como respuesta. ¿Sí o no?

Noel Vanstone leyó el papel y alzó la vista hacia ella con perplejidad y miedo crecientes. Ella aguardó obstinadamente hasta que habló.

- No -dijo Noel Vanstone con un hilo de voz-; no recibí la carta.

- ¡Primera prueba! -dijo la señora Lecount, arrebatándole el papel y devolviéndolo a la bolsa-. Una más, con su amable permiso, antes de que entremos en cosas más serias aún. En Aldborough, señor, le entregué una descripción escrita de una persona anónima y le pedí que la comparara con la señorita Bygrave en la siguiente ocasión en la que estuviera en su compañía. Después de haber mostrado la descripción al señor Bygrave en primer lugar (es inútil negarlo ahora, señor Noel, ¡su amigo de North Shingles no está aquí para ayudarle!), después de haber mostrado mi nota al señor Bygrave en primer lugar, hizo usted la comparación y descubrió que fallaba en su detalle más importante. En mi descripción de la señorita desconocida había dos pequeños lunares muy juntos en la parte izquierda del cuello y no había ningún lunar en el cuello de la señorita Bygrave cuando usted lo miró. Soy lo bastante mayor para ser su madre, señor Noel. Si la pregunta no es indiscreta, ¿podría decirme cuál es el estado actual de sus conocimientos sobre el cuello de su esposa?

La señora Lecount miró a su amo con implacable firmeza. Él retrocedió unos pasos, acobardado por esa mirada.

- No podría decirlo -balbuceó-. No sé. ¿Qué pretende con esas preguntas? No he vuelto

a pensar en los lunares desde entonces. Lleva el cabello recogido por abajo…

- Tiene excelentes razones para llevarlo así, señor -comentó la señora Lecount-. Intentaremos levantar esos cabellos antes de que hayamos terminado. Cuando he venido a buscarle al jardín, por la ventana de la cocina he visto a una pulcra joven con la labor en la mano que me ha mirado a los ojos como la doncella de una señora. ¿Es la doncella de su esposa esa joven? Disculpe, señor, ¿ha dicho que sí? En ese caso, otra pregunta, por favor. ¿La contrató usted o su mujer?

- Yo la contraté…

- ¿Cuando yo no estaba? ¿Cuando yo ignoraba por completo que usted tenía intención de tomar esposa o de contratar a una doncella?

- Sí.

- En esas condiciones, señor Noel, no puede usted sospechar de que haya conspirado para engañarle con la doncella como instrumento. Entre en la casa, señor, mientras yo me quedo aquí esperando. Pregunte a la mujer que peina a la señora Noel Vanstone mañana y tarde si su esposa tiene una marca en el cuello y, en caso afirmativo, cuál es esa marca.

Noel Vanstone dio unos cuantos pasos en dirección a la casa sin pronunciar palabra, luego se detuvo y se volvió para mirar a la señora Lecount. Sus ojos entrecerrados miraban con firmeza y su rostro marchito se había serenado súbitamente. La señora Lecount avanzó hacia él. Vio el cambio, pero a pesar de conocerle muy bien, no supo interpretar su auténtico significado.

- ¿Necesita usted una excusa, señor? -preguntó-. ¿No sabe cómo justificarse ante la doncella de su mujer por una pregunta como la que deseo que le haga? Es fácil encontrar buenas excusas para personas en la posición social de la doncella. Dígale que he venido aquí con la noticia de un legado para la señora Noel Vanstone y que se ha de resolver la cuestión de su identidad para que pueda recibir el dinero.

La señora Lecount señaló la casa. Él no prestó atención a su señal. Su rostro palidecía cada vez más. Miró a su ama de llaves, mudo e inmóvil.

- ¿Tiene usted miedo? -preguntó la señora Lecount.

Estas palabras lo despertaron; esas palabras encendieron por fin una chispa del fuego de su hombría. Se revolvió contra ella como una oveja contra un perro.

- ¡No toleraré que me interroguen y me den órdenes! -espetó, temblando como una hoja por aquella sensación nueva de su propio valor-. ¡No toleraré que me amenacen y me engañen más! ¿Cómo me ha encontrado? ¿Qué pretende viniendo aquí con sus insinuaciones y sus misterios? ¿Qué tiene que decir en contra de mi mujer?

Tranquilamente la señora Lecount abrió la bolsa de viaje y sacó su frasco de las sales por si se producía una emergencia.

- Me ha hablado usted en términos muy claros -dijo-. En términos igualmente claros, señor, tendrá su respuesta. ¿Está demasiado enojado para escuchar?

La expresión y el tono de la señora Lecount le alarmaron a su pesar. Su valor empezó a menguar de nuevo y, por desesperados que fueran sus esfuerzos por darle firmeza, le temblaba la voz al responder.

- Respóndame -dijo-, y hágalo de inmediato.

- Sus órdenes serán obedecidas al pie de la letra, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. He venido aquí con dos objetivos. Abrirle los ojos a su propia situación y salvar su fortuna, quizá incluso la vida. Su situación es ésta: la señorita Bygrave se ha casado con usted con una personalidad y un nombre falsos. ¿Podría hacer memoria? ¿Podría recordar a la

mujer disfrazada que le amenazó en Vauxhall Walk? Tan seguro como que estoy aquí ahora que aquella mujer es ahora su esposa.

Noel Vanstone la miró en silencio conteniendo el aliento. Entreabrió los labios, fijó la vista con alelado asombro. Lo repentino de la revelación había superado su objetivo. Lo había dejado estupefacto.

- ¿Mi esposa? -repitió, y estalló en imbéciles carcajadas.

- Su esposa -reiteró la señora Lecount.

La tensión a que estaban sometidas las facultades mentales de Noel Vanstone cedió al oír la repetición de esas dos palabras. Una idea le vino a la cabeza por primera vez. «¡Loca!», se dijo a sí mismo recordando súbitamente lo que su amigo el señor Bygrave le había dicho en Aldborough, agudizada la idea por el cambio que él en persona veía en aquel rostro ojeroso y de mirada extraviada.

Lo había dicho en un susurro, pero la señora Lecount lo oyó. Al instante se hallaba de nuevo a su lado. Por primera vez perdió los nervios y lo asió airadamente por el brazo.

- ¿Quiere poner a prueba mi locura, señor? -preguntó.

Él se desasió; su incredulidad intensamente sincera empezaba a darle de nuevo valor, el valor de enfrentarse con la afirmación que ella insistía en obligarle a aceptar.

- Sí -respondió-. ¿Qué debo hacer?

- Haga lo que yo le diga -dijo la señora Lecount-. Formule a la doncella en el acto esa pregunta sobre su ama. Y si le dice que la marca está ahí, haga algo más. Lléveme a la habitación de su mujer y abra el guardarropa en mi presencia con sus propias manos.

- ¿Qué quiere hacer en su guardarropa? -preguntó él.

- Lo sabrá cuando lo abra.

- ¡Muy extraño! -se dijo Noel Vanstone distraídamente-. Es como la escena de una novela; no se parece en nada a la vida real.

Se dirigió lentamente a la casa y la señora Lecount se quedó esperándole en el jardín.

Tras una ausencia de apenas unos minutos, Noel Vanstone volvió a aparecer en lo alto de los escalones que llevaban del jardín a la casa. Con una mano se cogió a la barandilla de hierro mientras con la otra hacía señas a la señora Lecount para que se reuniera con él en la escalera.

- ¿Qué ha dicho la doncella? -preguntó, acercándose-. ¿Ha visto la marca?

- Sí -respondió en un susurro. Lo que había oído de labios de la doncella había producido un acusado cambio en él. El horror de la inminente revelación se había apoderado de su pensamiento, dejándolo paralizado. Se movía como un autómata; hablaba y se comportaba como un hombre que anda en sueños.

- ¿Quiere cogerse de mi brazo, señor?

Noel Vanstone negó con la cabeza y precedió a la señora Lecount a lo largo del pasillo y escaleras arriba, en dirección al dormitorio de su mujer. Cuando ella entró y cerró la puerta con llave, él aguardó pasivamente sus instrucciones sin hacer comentario alguno, sin mostrar apariencia de sorpresa. No se había quitado el sombrero ni el gabán. La señora Lecount se los quitó por él.

- Gracias -dijo, con la docilidad de un niño bien enseñado-. Es como la escena de una novela; no se parece en nada a la vida real.

El dormitorio no era muy amplio y los muebles eran voluminosos y anticuados. Pero se

notaba el gusto innato y el refinamiento de Magdalen por todas partes, en los pequeños adornos que embellecían y alegraban la habitación. En el aire frío flotaba el fragante aroma de unos pétalos de rosa secos. La señora Lecount olisqueó el perfume frunciendo el entrecejo con desprecio y subió la hoja de la ventana hasta arriba.

- ¡Bah! -dijo, con un escalofrío de virtuosa repugnancia-. ¡La atmósfera de la falsedad!

Se sentó cerca de la ventana. El armario se hallaba frente a ella, en la pared opuesta, y la cama a un lado, a su derecha.

- Abra el guardarropa, señor Noel -dijo-. Yo no voy a acercarme a él. No voy a tocar nada. Saque los vestidos usted mismo y póngalos sobre la cama. Sáquelos uno por uno hasta que yo le diga basta.

Noel Vanstone obedeció.

- Lo haré todo lo bien que sepa -dijo-. Tengo las manos frías y la cabeza pesada.

No había muchos vestidos en el armario, pues Magdalen se había llevado unos cuantos. Después de poner dos vestidos sobre la cama, Noel Vanstone se vio obligado a buscar en el fondo del armario para hallar un tercero. Cuando lo sacó, la señora Lecount le indicó que parara con un gesto. Ya había alcanzado su objetivo: había encontrado el vestido marrón de alpaca.

- Extiéndalo sobre la cama, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. Verá que tiene un doble volante a lo largo del bajo. Levante el volante superior y recorra con los dedos el volante interior centímetro a centímetro. Si llega a un punto en el que falte un trozo de tela, deténgase y míreme.

Noel Vanstone recorrió el volante lentamente con los dedos durante algo más de un minuto, luego se detuvo y alzó la vista. La señora Lecount sacó su monedero y lo abrió.

- Cada una de las palabras que voy a pronunciar ahora, señor, serán de vital importancia para usted y para mí -dijo-. Escúcheme con la mayor atención. Cuando la mujer que dijo llamarse señorita Garth vino a vernos a Vauxhall Walk, yo me arrodillé detrás de la silla en la que estaba sentada y corté un trozo de tela del vestido que llevaba, pues podría ayudarme a reconocerlo si alguna vez lo volvía a ver. Lo hice mientras la mujer estaba concentrada hablando con usted. Desde entonces el trozo de tela ha estado guardado en mi monedero. Vea usted mismo, señor Noel, si encaja en el agujero de ese vestido que acaba de sacar con sus propias manos del guardarropa de su mujer.

La señora Lecount se levantó y le tendió el trozo de tela desde el otro lado de la cama. Él colocó el trozo en el espacio vacío del volante con toda la maña que le permitieron sus dedos temblorosos.

- ¿Encaja, señor? -preguntó la señora Lecount.

El vestido se deslizó de las manos de Noel Vanstone y poco a poco la palidez mortalmente azulada que, en opinión de todos los médicos que le habían atendido, la señora Lecount debía temer, fue extendiéndose por su rostro. Ella no había contado con una respuesta como la que veía ahora en las mejillas de su amo. Acudió a su lado prestamente con el frasco de sales en la mano. Noel Vanstone cayó de rodillas ante ella, agarrándose de su vestido con la desesperación de un hombre a punto de ahogarse.

- ¡Sálveme! -dijo en un susurro ronco y jadeante-. ¡Oh, Lecount, sálveme!

- Le prometo salvarle -dijo la señora Lecount-. Estoy aquí con los medios y la determinación de salvarle. Apártese de ahí, venga donde le dé el aire. -Lo alzó mientras hablaba y lo condujo hasta la ventana-. ¿Nota otra vez la fría punzada en el costado izquierdo? -preguntó, alarmada por primera vez-. ¿Tiene su mujer agua de colonia o sal volátil en la habitación? ¡No se fatigue hablando, señale el lugar!

Él señaló un viejo armarito triangular de madera de nogal comida por la carcoma, fijado

en lo alto de la pared en una esquina de la habitación. La señora Lecount probó a abrirlo; estaba cerrado con llave.

Mientras hacía este descubrimiento vio que la cabeza de su amo caía lentamente hacia atrás en el butacón donde lo había colocado. Acudió a su memoria la advertencia de los médicos en años anteriores: «Si deja que se desmaye, lo deja morir», como si se la hubieran dicho la víspera. Miró de nuevo el armarito. Debajo había un nicho y en él unos cabos de cuerda, en apariencia depositados allí como útiles de embalaje. La señora Lecount agarró un trozo de cuerda sin dudarlo, ató con fuerza un extremo alrededor del pomo del armarito y, cogiendo el otro extremo con ambas manos, tiró de la cuerda súbitamente con todas sus fuerzas. La madera podrida cedió, las puertas del armarito se abrieron de golpe y un montón de baratijas cayó al suelo con estrépito. Sin pararse a mirar las piezas de porcelana rotas ni los cristales que tenía a sus pies, escudriñó el oscuro interior del armarito y vio el brillo de dos frascos de cristal. Uno se hallaba arrinconado al fondo en un extremo del armarito, el otro estaba un poco por delante, ocultándolo casi. La señora Lecount se apoderó de ambos inmediatamente y se los llevó, uno en cada mano, a la ventana, donde podía leer las etiquetas a la luz.

El frasco que miró primero fue el de la mano derecha. La etiqueta rezaba: «Sal volátil».

En el acto dejó el otro frasco sobre la mesa sin mirarlo. El otro frasco se quedó allí, esperando su turno. Contenía un líquido oscuro, y la etiqueta rezaba: «VENENO».

CAPÍTULO II

La señora Lecount mezcló la sal volátil con agua y le administró el preparado inmediatamente. El estimulante hizo su efecto. Minutos después, Noel Vanstone podía incorporarse en la silla sin ayuda, el color de su cara mejoró y respiró con mayor facilidad.

- ¿Qué tal se encuentra ahora, señor? -preguntó la señora Lecount-. ¿Se le ha calentado el costado izquierdo?

Noel Vanstone no prestó atención a esta pregunta; sus ojos se pasearon por la habitación y se posaron por casualidad en la mesa. Para sorpresa de la señora Lecount, en lugar de responderle, se inclinó y contempló con ojos asombrados y señalando con la mano el segundo frasco que había sacado del armarito y dejado de lado precipitadamente, sin fijarse en él. Viéndole presa de una nueva alarma, la señora Lecount se acercó a la mesa y miró donde él miraba. La etiqueta del frasco era plenamente visible, y en ella, escrita con la sencilla letra del boticario de Aldborough, se leía una única palabra sobrecogedora: «VENENO».

Incluso la señora Lecount perdió su sangre fría ante aquel descubrimiento. No estaba preparada para ver sus más funestos presagios -frutos no reconocidos de su odio hacia Magdalen- convertidos en realidad como los veía en aquel momento. La desesperación suicida que había llevado a Magdalen a procurarse el veneno, el propósito suicida con el que lo había guardado luego, recelando del futuro, llevaban consigo su justo castigo. Allí estaba el frasco, en ausencia de Magdalen, dando falso testimonio de una traición que jamás se le había pasado por la cabeza: ¡atentar contra la vida de su marido!

Con la mano señalando aún maquinalmente la mesa, Noel Vanstone alzó la cabeza y miró a la señora Lecount.

- Lo he sacado del armarito -dijo ella, en respuesta a la mirada-. He sacado los dos frascos juntos sin saber cuál era el que buscaba. Estoy tan escandalizada y asustada como usted.

- ¡Veneno! -dijo él en voz baja, lentamente-. Veneno que mi mujer guarda bajo llave en el armarito de su propia habitación. -Se interrumpió y miró a la señora Lecount una vez más-. ¿Para mí? -preguntó con tono de alelada curiosidad.

- No hablaremos de ello, señor, hasta que se haya calmado un poco -dijo la señora Lecount-. Mientras tanto, el peligro que acecha en este frasco será eliminado instantáneamente en su presencia. -Quitó el corcho y arrojó el láudano por la ventana, seguido del frasco-. Intentemos olvidar este horrible hallazgo por el momento -prosiguió-. Bajemos ahora mismo. Todo lo que me queda por decirle puede decirse en otra habitación.

Ayudó a su amo a levantarse de la silla e hizo que se cogiera de su brazo. «Bueno ha sido que llegara cuando he llegado -pensó mientras bajaban por las escaleras-. Bueno para él y bueno para mí.»

Una vez en el pasillo, la señora Lecount se dirigió a la puerta principal, donde aguardaba el carruaje que la había llevado hasta allí desde Dumfries, y ordenó al cochero que acomodara los caballos en la posada más cercana y volviera a buscarla al cabo de dos horas. Hecho esto, acompañó a Noel Vanstone a la sala de estar, azuzó el fuego e instaló a su amo cómodamente en un butacón. Éste permaneció sentado unos minutos, calentándose las manos sin fuerzas, como un viejo, y mirando fijamente las llamas. Luego habló.

- Cuando aquella mujer vino a Vauxhall Walk a amenazarme -empezó, mirando aún el fuego-, usted volvió al gabinete después de que ella se hubiera ido y me dijo... -Se interrumpió, tuvo un estremecimiento y perdió el hilo de sus recuerdos en ese punto.

- Le dije, señor -dijo el ama de llaves-, que en mi opinión aquella mujer era la señorita Vanstone en persona. ¡No se sobresalte, señor Noel! Su mujer se ha ido y yo estoy aquí para cuidarle. Si se siente asustado, dígase a sí mismo: «Lecount está aquí; Lecount cuidará de mí». La verdad ha de ser contada, señor, por duro que resulte oírla. La señorita Magdalen Vanstone era la mujer que fue a visitarle disfrazada, y la mujer que fue a visitarle disfrazada es la mujer con la que se ha casado. La conspiración con la que le amenazó en Londres es la conspiración que ha hecho de ella su mujer. Ésta es la verdad pura y simple. Ya ha visto usted el vestido de arriba. Aunque ese vestido no hubiera existido ya, seguiría teniendo mis pruebas para convencerle. Gracias a mi entrevista con la señora Bygrave, he descubierto que la casa en que se alojó su mujer en Londres se hallaba enfrente de nuestra casa de Vauxhall Walk. Le he echado el guante a una de las hijas de la patrona, que observó a su esposa desde una habitación interior y la vio disfrazarse, que puede confirmar su verdadera identidad y la de su compañera, la señora Bygrave, y que me ha proporcionado, a petición mía, una exposición de los hechos por escrito que está dispuesta a repetir bajo juramento si cualquier persona se atreve a contradecirla. Leerá usted la exposición, señor Noel, si le apetece, cuando esté más capacitado para entenderla. También leerá una carta escrita por la señorita Garth (que le repetirá personalmente lo que me escribió a mí) de su puño y letra. En esa carta niega formalmente haber estado en Vauxhall Walk y afirma formalmente que esos lunares del cuello de su mujer son marcas peculiares de la señorita Magdalen Vanstone, a la que conoce desde la infancia. Lo digo con justo orgullo, no hallará un solo punto débil en las pruebas que le traigo. Si el señor Bygrave no hubiera robado mi carta, habría recibido usted mi advertencia antes de que me hicieran viajar hasta Zurich con un cruel engaño, y las pruebas que ahora le traigo, después de su boda, se las hubiera ofrecido antes de ésta. No me haga responsable, señor, por lo que ha ocurrido desde que abandoné Inglaterra. ¡Culpe a la hija bastarda de su tío y a ese canalla del ojo marrón y el ojo verde!

Pronunció estas últimas palabras llenas de venenoso rencor tan despacio y tan claramente como había dicho todo lo demás. Noel Vanstone no respondió; seguía sentado, encogido ante el fuego. La señora Lecount dio media vuelta y lo miró de frente. Noel Vanstone lloraba en silencio.

- ¡La quería tanto! -dijo el desventurado hombrecillo-. ¡Y creía que ella me quería tanto a mí!

La señora Lecount le dio la espalda en desdeñoso silencio. «¡La quería!» Al repetir esas palabras para sí, su rostro macilento recuperó casi la belleza gracias a la magnífica intensidad de su desprecio.

Se acercó a una estantería que había en el extremo opuesto de la habitación y examinó los volúmenes que contenía. No llevaba mucho tiempo entretenida de aquella manera cuando le sobresaltó la voz de su amo llamándola presa del pavor. Las lágrimas se habían desvanecido de su rostro; el terror se había adueñado de nuevo de su expresión cuando lo volvió hacia ella.

- ¡Lecount! -dijo, aferrándose al ama de llaves con ambas manos-. ¿Puede envenenarse un huevo? He tomado un huevo esta mañana para desayunar, y un poco de tostada.

- Tranquilícese, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. El veneno de la falsedad de su mujer es el único que ha tomado por ahora. Si hubiera resuelto ya hacerle pagar el precio de su locura con su vida, no se habría ausentado de la casa dejándole vivo. Deseche esa idea. Es mediodía, necesita tomar algo. Tengo más cosas que decirle en bien de su propia seguridad. Quiero que haga usted algo que ha de hacerse en el acto. Haga acopio de fuerzas y lo conseguirá. Yo le daré ejemplo comiendo, si todavía desconfía de la comida de esta casa. ¿Tendrá la serenidad suficiente para darle órdenes a la criada si toco la campanilla? Es necesario para mis propósitos que nadie crea que está usted enfermo o perturbado. Pruebe primero conmigo antes de que venga la criada. Veamos qué aspecto tiene y qué tal suena cuando diga: «Sirva el almuerzo».

Después de dos ensayos, la señora Lecount consideró que estaba preparado para dar la orden sin delatarse.

Louisa respondió a la llamada; Louisa lanzó a la señora Lecount una mirada penetrante. La criada sirvió el almuerzo; la criada lanzó a la señora Lecount una mirada penetrante. Cuando terminó el almuerzo, la cocinera quitó la mesa; la cocinera lanzó a la señora Lecount una mirada penetrante. Era evidente que las tres sirvientas barruntaban que algo extraordinario ocurría en la casa. No cabía la menor duda de que habían acordado repartirse las tres oportunidades que les ofrecía el servicio de la comida para entrar en la habitación.

A la sagaz señora Lecount no se le escapó la curiosidad de que era objeto. «Hice bien -pensó-, en procurarme en su momento los medios necesarios para mis fines. Si pierdo más tiempo del estrictamente necesario, alguna de esas mujeres podría interponerse en mi camino». Incitada por esta reflexión, cogió su bolsa de viaje de un rincón tan pronto como la última de las criadas abandonó la estancia y, sentándose al otro extremo de la mesa frente a Noel Vanstone, lo miró unos instantes con atención inquisidora. Había medido con sumo cuidado la cantidad de vino que su amo debía beber con la comida -le había dejado beber exactamente lo que necesitaba para darle ánimos sin confundir sus pensamientos- y examinaba ahora su rostro con expresión crítica, como un artista examina su cuadro al final de un día de trabajo. El resultado pareció satisfacerla y abordó sin dilación el asunto más serio de la entrevista.

- ¿Querrá usted mirar las pruebas escritas de las que le he hablado, señor Noel, antes de que siga hablando? -preguntó-. ¿O está usted suficientemente convencido de la verdad para proceder de inmediato con la propuesta que tengo que hacerle ahora?

- Oigamos su propuesta -dijo, apoyando los codos en la mesa y la cabeza en las manos con expresión hosca.

La señora Lecount sacó de su bolsa de viaje las pruebas escritas a las que acababa de referirse y las colocó con cuidado a un lado, al alcance de su amo, por si éste quería consultarlas. Lejos de desanimarse por la brusquedad de sus modales, la señora Lecount se animó visiblemente. Lo conocía bien y sabía que era un signo prometedor. En las raras ocasiones en que se despertaba la poca determinación que Noel Vanstone poseía, se reafirmaba invariablemente -como en la mayoría de los hombres débiles- con agresividad. En tales momentos, su resolución crecía en proporción directa a su malhumor y descortesía hacia los demás, y menguaba en proporción directa a la consideración y cortesía que demostraba. El tono de la respuesta que acababa de dar y la actitud que había adoptado convencieron a la señora Lecount de que el vino español y el cordero escocés habían cumplido con su deber y habían reavivado su decaído valor.

- Le haré la pregunta por pura formalidad, señor, si usted quiere -prosiguió la señora Lecount-. Pero tengo la seguridad, sin tener que preguntarlo, de que ha hecho usted testamento, ¿verdad?

Él asintió sin mirarla.

- ¿En favor de su mujer?

Él volvió a asentir.

- ¿Le ha legado cuanto posee?

- No.

La señora Lecount se sorprendió.

- ¿Hizo usted esa salvedad espontáneamente, señor Noel? -preguntó-. ¿O es posible acaso que su mujer pusiera límites personales a sus intereses en el testamento?

Noel Vanstone guardó silencio, incómodo; era evidente que le avergonzaba responder a la pregunta. La señora Lecount la repitió de una forma menos directa.

- ¿Cuánto ha dejado usted a su viuda, señor Noel, en el caso de que fallezca?

- Ochenta mil libras.

La respuesta servía para ambas preguntas. Ochenta mil libras eran exactamente la fortuna que Michael Vanstone había arrebatado a las hijas huérfanas de su hermano a la muerte de éste, exactamente la fortuna que el hijo de Michael Vanstone había conservado, a su vez, tan inmisericorde como su padre. El silencio de Noel Vanstone era tan elocuente como la confesión que le avergonzaba hacer. En la debilidad de su chifladura, no cabía la menor duda de que hubiera puesto todos sus bienes a los pies de su mujer; pero aquella muchacha, cuya osadía vengativa había desafiado todo comedimiento, aquella muchacha, cuya desesperada determinación no había flaqueado siquiera ante la puerta de la iglesia, en la hora misma de su triunfo, ¡sólo había querido una parte del hombre que estaba dispuesto a dárselo todo!; había logrado arrebatarle exactamente la fortuna de su padre ¡y luego había vuelto la espalda a la mano que la tentaba con decenas de miles más! La sorpresa enmudeció momentáneamente a la señora Lecount; Magdalen le había arrancado por la fuerza un asombro semejante a la admiración, un asombro que su animadversión hubiera rechazado de buena gana. A partir de ese momento, su odio hacia Magdalen fue diez veces mayor.

- No me cabe la menor duda, señor -continuó tras la breve pausa-, de que la señora de Noel Vanstone le dio excelentes razones para explicar por qué el legado que debía recibir a la muerte de usted había de ser ni más ni menos que de ochenta mil libras. Y, por otra parte, estoy igualmente convencida de que usted, que inocentemente no sospechaba nada, halló esas razones concluyentes en su momento. Ese momento ha pasado ya. Ha abierto usted los ojos, señor, y no dejará de advertir (como advierto yo) que casualmente la propiedad de Combe-Raven asciende a la misma suma exactamente que la herencia que ha legado a su mujer siguiendo sus propias instrucciones. Si todavía alberga alguna duda sobre el motivo por el que se casó con usted, busque en su testamento, ¡y ahí lo hallará!

Noel Vanstone alzó la cabeza y escuchó con la mayor atención lo que ella le decía por primera vez desde que se sentaron a la mesa. La propiedad de Combe-Raven no había ocupado jamás un lugar especial en su estima. Había llegado a sus manos unida al resto de las posesiones de su padre, a la muerte de éste. Por su naturaleza, el descubrimiento que acababan de hacerle había escapado por completo a sus hábitos comunes de reflexión, así como su inocente falta de suspicacia. No dijo nada, pero miró a la señora Lecount con menos malhumor. Sus modales eran más zalameros; la marea alta de su valor empezaba ya a bajar.

- Su situación, señor, debe de ser ahora tan clara como lo es para mí -dijo la señora Lecount-. Sólo queda un obstáculo entre esa mujer y la consecución de sus fines. Ese obstáculo es su vida, señor. Después del hallazgo que hemos hecho arriba, usted mismo puede darse cuenta de lo que vale su vida.

Al oír estas terribles palabras, se retiró hasta la última gota de su menguante resolución.

- ¡No me asuste! -suplicó-. Ya me ha asustado bastante. -Se levantó y arrastró la silla tras él rodeando la mesa hasta colocarse junto a la señora Lecount. Se sentó y besó su mano acariciadoramente-. ¡Usted que es tan buena! -dijo, bajando la voz-. ¡Excelente Lecount! Dígame qué debo hacer. Estoy decidido. ¡Haré cualquier cosa por salvar mi vida!

- ¿Tiene usted recado de escribir en la habitación, señor? -preguntó la señora Lecount-. ¿Querría ponerlo sobre la mesa, por favor?

Mientras él recogía las diferentes piezas del recado, la señora Lecount volvió a servirse de los recursos de su bolsa de viaje. Sacó dos documentos, escritos ambos con la misma y pulcra letra comercial. Uno era descrito como «Borrador para testamento propuesto» y el otro como «Borrador para carta propuesta». Le tembló un poco la mano cuando los colocó sobre la mesa y se aplicó a la nariz el frasco de sales que había llevado consigo en beneficio de Noel Vanstone.

- Esperaba, cuando he llegado aquí, señor Noel -prosiguió-, poder darle más tiempo para reflexionar del que ahora me parece prudente darle. Cuando me ha dicho antes que su mujer se ha ido a Londres, he creído probable que el objeto de su viaje fuera visitar a su hermana y a la señorita Garth. Desde el espantoso hallazgo que hemos hecho arriba, me inclino a cambiar de opinión. La obstinación de su mujer en no decirle quiénes son los amigos a los que ha ido a ver me llena de alarma. Puede que tenga cómplices en Londres, o incluso, por lo que sabemos, puede que tenga cómplices en esta casa. Sus tres sirvientas, señor, han aprovechado la oportunidad de entrar por turno en esta habitación para observarme. ¡No me gustan sus miradas! Ni usted ni yo sabemos lo que puede ocurrir de un día para otro o incluso en cuestión de horas. Si sigue usted mi consejo, se adelantará a cualquier posible accidente, y cuando vuelva el carruaje ¡abandonará esta casa conmigo!

- ¡Sí, sí! -dijo él con vehemencia-. Abandonaré la casa con usted. No me quedaría aquí solo ni por todo el oro del mundo. ¿Para qué queremos la pluma y el tintero? ¿Va a escribir usted o voy a escribir yo?

- Escribirá usted, señor -dijo el ama de llaves-. Los medios por los que garantizará su propia seguridad habrá de ponerlos en marcha usted personalmente de principio a fin. Yo sugiero, señor Noel, y usted decide. Evalúe su propia situación, señor. ¿Cuál es la primera y más urgente necesidad? Evidentemente ésta. Tiene que eliminar el interés de su mujer en su muerte haciendo otro testamento.

Noel Vanstone expresó su aprobación asintiendo con viveza; se le subió el color a la cara y un triunfal destello malévolo brilló en sus ojos entrecerrados.

- No recibirá ni un penique -dijo para sus adentros en un susurro-. ¡No recibirá ni un penique!

- Cuando esté redactado su testamento, señor -continuó la señora Lecount-, tendrá que depositarlo en manos de una persona digna de confianza, no en mis manos, señor Noel, ¡yo sólo soy su sirvienta! Luego, cuando el testamento esté a salvo y usted también, escriba a su mujer a esta casa. Dígale que su infame impostura ha sido desenmascarada, dígale que ha hecho un nuevo testamento que la deshereda, dígale, con justa indignación, que no quiere volver a verla. Colóquese usted en esa posición de fuerza y no se hallará más a merced de su mujer, sino ella a la suya. Haga valer su poder, señor, con la ayuda de la ley, y aplástela para que acepte en el futuro cualquier condición que a usted le plazca imponerle.

Noel Vanstone empuñó la pluma con ardor.

- Sí -dijo con suficiencia vengativa-, cualesquiera condiciones que me plazca imponerle. -De repente se interrumpió y pareció desalentado y perplejo-. ¿Cómo voy a hacerlo ahora? -preguntó, arrojando la pluma sobre la mesa con la misma rapidez con que la había cogido.

- ¿Hacer qué, señor? -preguntó la señora Lecount.

- ¿Cómo puedo hacer testamento si el señor Loscombe está en Londres y no hay ningún abogado aquí para ayudarme?

La señora Lecount dio unos suaves golpecitos con el dedo índice en los papeles que había sobre la mesa ante ella.

- Toda la ayuda que necesita, señor, le espera aquí -dijo-. Medité este asunto cuidadosamente antes de venir y me procuré la ayuda confidencial de un amigo para que me guiara en la resolución de las dificultades que no podía resolver por mí misma. El amigo al que me refiero es un caballero de origen suizo, pero nacido y educado en Inglaterra. No es abogado de profesión; sin embargo, su experiencia legal es tan amplia que ha podido suministrarme, no sólo un modelo para que usted pueda hacer testamento, sino también el borrador de una carta que para nosotros es tan importante escribir como el testamento mismo. Le aguarda otra necesidad, señor Noel, que aún no he mencionado, pero que no es menos urgente, a su manera, que la necesidad de hacer

testamento.

- ¿Qué es? -preguntó él con curiosidad creciente.

- Lo trataremos cuando llegue la hora, señor -respondió la señora Lecount-. Su turno aún no ha llegado. Primero el testamento, por favor. Yo le dictaré del modelo que obra en mi poder y usted escribirá.

Noel Vanstone contempló el borrador del testamento y el borrador de la carta con suspicacia.

- Creo que debería ver esos documentos antes de que me los dicte -dijo-. Sería más satisfactorio para mí, Lecount.

- Por supuesto, señor -replicó la señora Lecount, tendiéndole los papeles de inmediato.

Él leyó primero el borrador del testamento, deteniéndose y frunciendo el entrecejo con desconfianza cada vez que encontraba espacios en blanco en el texto que habría de rellenar con nombres de personas y la enumeración de las sumas legadas a cada una de ellas. Dos o tres minutos de lectura le llevaron al final del documento. Se lo devolvió a la señora Lecount sin objetar nada.

El borrador de la carta era un documento mucho más largo. La leyó obstinadamente hasta el final con una expresión de perplejidad y descontento que demostraban que era completamente ininteligible para él.

- Quiero que me explique esto -dijo con un amago de su antigua suficiencia- antes de emprender acción alguna.

- Quedará explicado, señor, a medida que avancemos -dijo la señora Lecount.

- ¿De cabo a rabo?

- De cabo a rabo, señor Noel, cuando llegue el momento. ¿No tiene nada que objetar al testamento? Pues dediquémonos a él primero, como le he dicho antes. Usted mismo ha visto que es tan corto y sencillo que hasta un niño lo entendería. Pero si le queda algún resto de duda, no vacile en resolverla mostrándolo a un abogado. Mientras tanto, no quisiera parecerle entrometida, pero recuerde que todos somos mortales y que las oportunidades perdidas no se vuelven a presentar. ¡Haga testamento mientras aún tiene tiempo, señor, y sus enemigos nada recelan!

La señora Lecount desplegó una hoja de papel de cartas y la alisó ante él, hundió la pluma en el tintero y se la colocó en la mano. Él la cogió sin decir nada; experimentaba, según todas las apariencias, un momentáneo desasosiego. Pero lo principal se había logrado. Allí estaba sentado, con el papel delante y la pluma en la mano, dispuesto seriamente por fin a hacer testamento.

- Lo primero que debe decidir, señor -dijo la señora Lecount, tras echar una mirada preliminar al borrador-, es el albacea. No deseo influir en su decisión, pero creo que no sería incorrecto recordarle que una elección sensata es la elección de un viejo amigo digno de toda confianza.

- Se refiere al almirante, supongo -dijo Noel Vanstone.

La señora Lecount asintió.

- Muy bien -continuó él-. Que sea el almirante.

Era evidente que seguía teniendo el ánimo oprimido. A pesar de las penosas circunstancias en las que se hallaba, no era propio de él aceptar el sensato consejo de la señora Lecount, totalmente desinteresado, sin poner algún pero, como había hecho ahora.

- ¿Preparado, señor?

- Sí.

La señora Lecount dictó el primer párrafo del borrador como sigue:

Ésta es la última voluntad y testamento de Noel Vanstone, que reside actualmente en Baliol Cottage, cerca de Dumfries. Revoco totalmente y en cada uno de sus detalles mi anterior testamento del trece de septiembre de mil ochocientos cuarenta y siete, y por la presente nombro al contraalmirante Arthur Everard Bartram, de St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex, único albacea de éste mi testamento.

- ¿Ha escrito esas palabras, señor?

- Sí.

La señora Lecount dejó el borrador; Noel Vanstone dejó la pluma. Ninguno de los dos miró al otro. Se produjo un largo silencio.

- Estoy esperando -dijo por fin la señora Lecount- a oír cuáles son sus deseos con respecto a la distribución de su fortuna. Su gran fortuna -añadió con implacable énfasis.

Él volvió a empuñar la pluma y empezó a arrancar plumas del cálamo en completo silencio.

- Quizá el testamento aún vigente le ayude a instruirme, señor -insistió la señora Lecount-. ¿Puedo preguntarle a quién dejaba todo su dinero sobrante tras legar las ochenta mil libras a su esposa?

Si hubiera contestado a la pregunta con sinceridad, habría tenido que decir: «He dejado todo el sobrante a mi primo, George Bartram», a lo que habría seguido el reconocimiento implícito de que el nombre de la señora Lecount no se mencionaba en el testamento en su presencia. En su situación, un hombre mucho más audaz habría sentido la misma opresión y la misma turbación que él. Arrancó el último trozo de pluma del cálamo e, intentando atravesar de un salto el abismo que tenía a sus pies, se adelantó a cumplir espontáneamente las exigencias de la señora Lecount.

- Preferiría no hablar de ningún testamento salvo del que estoy haciendo ahora -dijo, molesto-. Lo primero, Lecount... -Vaciló, se metió la punta desnuda del cálamo en la boca, la mordisqueó pensativamente y no dijo más.

- ¿Sí, señor? -insistió la señora Lecount.

- Lo primero es...

- ¿Sí, señor?

- ¿Lo primero es, es... disponer una cantidad para usted?

Pronunció estas últimas palabras con un tono de interrogación quejumbrosa, como si aún no hubiera perdido toda esperanza de recibir una magnánima negativa. La señora Lecount se encargó de aclararle ese punto sin perder más tiempo.

- Gracias, señor Noel -dijo, con el tono y las maneras de una mujer que no agradecía un favor sino que recibía un derecho.

Él mordisqueó de nuevo el cálamo. El sudor empezó a perlar su rostro.

- La dificultad está -señaló- en decir cuánto.

- Su llorado padre, señor -replicó la señora Lecount-, resolvió esa dificultad (recuérdelo) durante su última enfermedad.

- No lo recuerdo -dijo Noel Vanstone tercamente.

- Usted se hallaba a un lado de su cama, señor, y yo al otro. Intentábamos en vano persuadirle de que hiciera testamento. Después de decirnos que esperaría a ponerse bien para hacerlo, me miró y dijo unas palabras amables y sentidas que mi memoria atesorará hasta el fin de mis días. ¿Ha olvidado usted esas palabras, señor Noel?

- Sí -respondió el señor Noel sin vacilar.

- En mi actual situación, señor -replicó la señora Lecount-, la delicadeza me impide avivar su memoria.

El ama de llaves consultó su reloj y enmudeció. Él apretó los puños y se balanceó en su silla sumido en la agonía de la indecisión. La señora Lecount se negó pasivamente a prestarle atención.

- ¿Qué diría usted...? -empezó Noel Vanstone, y se interrumpió de repente.

- ¿Sí, señor?

- ¿Qué diría usted de... mil libras?

La señora Lecount se levantó y lo miró a la cara con la majestuosa indignación de una mujer insultada.

- Después del servicio que le he prestado hoy, señor Noel -dijo-, me he ganado al menos su respeto, si no más. Le deseo buenos días.

- ¡Dos mil! -exclamó Noel Vanstone, con el valor de la desesperación.

La señora Lecount dobló sus papeles y se colgó la bolsa de viaje del brazo en desdeñoso silencio.

- ¡Tres mil!

La señora Lecount se alejó de la mesa con impenetrable dignidad en dirección a la puerta.

- ¡Cuatro mil!

La señora Lecount se arrebujó en su chal con un escalofrío y abrió la puerta.

- ¡Cinco mil!

Noel Vanstone juntó las manos y se las retorció ante la mirada del ama de llaves en un arrebato de rabia e incertidumbre. «Cinco mil» era el lamento fúnebre de su suicidio pecuniario.

La señora Lecount cerró la puerta con suavidad y dio un paso hacia delante.

- ¿Exentas de derechos de sucesión, señor? -preguntó.

- ¡No!

La señora Lecount giró en redondo y abrió de nuevo la puerta.

- ¡Sí!

La señora Lecount volvió y ocupó de nuevo su sitio ante la mesa como si nada hubiera ocurrido.

- Cinco mil libras exentas de derechos de sucesión fue la suma, señor, que me prometió su padre con su estima y agradecimiento -dijo tranquilamente-. Si decide usted hacer memoria, como no ha hecho hasta ahora, su memoria le dirá que es verdad. Acepto que, como hijo, cumpla usted la promesa de su padre, señor Noel, y ahí me detengo. Me

niego a aprovecharme de mi situación con respecto a usted, me niego a arrancarle nada más a costa de sus temores. Tiene usted la protección de mi respeto por mí misma y por el ilustre apellido que llevo. Usted sabe todo lo que he hecho y todo lo que he sufrido a su servicio. ¡La viuda del profesor Lecompte, señor, toma lo que en justicia le pertenece y nada más!

Mientras hablaba, las huellas de la enfermedad sufrida parecieron desvanecerse de su rostro momentáneamente; una firme luz interior brilló en sus ojos; toda ella se encendía e iluminaba al resplandor de su propio triunfo, el triple triunfo de conseguir lo que quería, de mantener su integridad y de igualar la abnegación incorruptible de Magdalen en su propio terreno.

- Seguiremos cuando vuelva a ser usted dueño de sí mismo, señor. Primero esperemos un poco.

La señora Lecount dio tiempo a su amo para serenarse, y luego, después de consultar su borrador, dictó el segundo párrafo del testamento en estos términos:

Doy y lego a la señora Virginie Lecompte (viuda del profesor Lecompte, antes residente en Zurich) la suma de cinco mil libras, exentas de derechos de sucesión. Y con este legado, deseo hacer constar que no sólo expreso el agradecimiento por el afecto y la fidelidad de la señora Lecompte en su calidad de ama de llaves, sino que creo también haber cumplido las intenciones de mi difunto padre, quien, de no ser por la circunstancia de haber muerto sin testar, hubiera dejado a madame Lecompte en su testamento la misma muestra de agradecida consideración por sus servicios que ahora dejo yo en el mío.

- ¿Ha escrito usted las últimas palabras, señor?

- Sí.

La señora Lecount se inclinó sobre la mesa y ofreció su mano a Noel Vanstone.

- Gracias, señor Noel -dijo-. Las cinco mil libras son el reconocimiento por parte de su padre de lo que hice por él. Las palabras del testamento son el reconocimiento de usted.

Noel Vanstone esbozó una sonrisa por primera vez. Pensándolo bien, le consolaba la idea de que las cosas pudieran haber sido peor. Pagar la deuda de gratitud con una frase no negociable con su banquero era un bálsamo para su espíritu herido. Hiciera su padre lo que hiciera, ¡él había conseguido una ganga con Lecount, al fin y al cabo!

- Un poco más, señor -prosiguió la señora Lecount-, y habrá terminado con su penoso pero necesario deber. Una vez resuelta la insignificante cuestión de mi legado, llegamos a lo más importante: el destino futuro de una gran fortuna aguarda ahora sus órdenes. ¿Quién la heredará?

Noel Vanstone empezó a retorcerse de nuevo en su silla. Ni siquiera bajo la todopoderosa fascinación de su mujer había conseguido despedirse de su dinero por escrito sin una punzada de dolor. Había soportado esa punzada, se había resignado al sacrificio, y ahora, ¡ahí estaba de nuevo la temida prueba aguardándole despiadadamente por segunda vez!

- Quizá pueda ayudarle a decidir, señor, si repito una pregunta que ya le he hecho antes -señaló la señora Lecount-. En el testamento que hizo bajo la influencia de su mujer, ¿a quién le dejó el dinero sobrante que quedaba a su disposición?

No había ningún daño en contestar ahora. Noel Vanstone reconoció que se lo había dejado a su primo George.

- No podía haber hecho nada mejor, señor Noel, y no puede hacer nada mejor ahora -dijo la señora Lecount-. El señor George y sus dos hermanas son sus únicos parientes vivos. Una de esas hermanas es una inválida incurable que dispone ya de más dinero del que requiere para todas las necesidades que su enfermedad le permite tener. La otra es la esposa de un hombre más rico aún que usted. Legar el dinero a esas hermanas es desperdiciarlo. Legar el dinero a George es dar a su primo exactamente la ayuda que necesitará cuando herede un día la casa medio derruida y la propiedad empobrecida de su tío. El testamento que nombre albacea al almirante y heredero al señor George es el más correcto. Hace honor a los derechos de la amistad y justicia a los derechos de la sangre.

La señora Lecount hablaba con enardecido afecto, pues recordaba con agradecimiento cuanto ella misma debía a la hospitalidad de St. Crux. Noel Vanstone cogió otro cálamo y lo empezó a despojar de plumas como antes al primero.

- Sí -admitió a regañadientes-, supongo que ha de ser George mi heredero; supongo que es él quien más derecho tiene. -Vaciló, miró la puerta, miró la ventana como si anhelara escapar por un camino u otro-. Oh, Lecount -exclamó lastimosamente-, ¡es una fortuna tan grande! Déjeme esperar un poco antes de dejársela a nadie.

Con gran sorpresa por su parte, la señora Lecount accedió de inmediato a aquella petición tan característica.

- Deseo que espere, señor -replicó-. Tengo algo importante que decirle antes de que añada otra línea a su testamento. Hace un momento le he dicho que debíamos prever una segunda necesidad relacionada con su situación actual cuando llegara el momento. El momento ha llegado. Tiene usted una seria dificultad con la que enfrentarse y vencer antes de que pueda dejar su fortuna a su primo George.

- ¿Qué dificultad? -preguntó él.

La señora Lecount se levantó de la silla sin responder, se acercó a la puerta sigilosamente y la abrió de repente. No había nadie escuchando fuera; el pasillo estaba vacío de un extremo al otro.

- Desconfío de todos los sirvientes -dijo, regresando a su sitio-, de los suyos en particular. Acerque su silla, señor Noel. Lo que tengo que decirle ahora no debe ser oído por criatura viviente alguna salvo nosotros dos.

CAPÍTULO III

Se produjo una pausa de unos minutos mientras la señora Lecount desplegaba el segundo de los documentos que tenía sobre la mesa y refrescaba la memoria echándole un rápido vistazo. Hecho esto, se dirigió una vez más a Noel Vanstone, procurando bajar la voz para hacerla inaudible a quien pudiera escuchar desde el pasillo.

- Debo pedirle permiso, señor -empezó-, para volver al tema de su esposa. Lo hago de mala gana, y le prometo que lo que voy a decir ahora sobre ella lo diré, por el bien de usted y por el mío, con las palabras estrictamente necesarias. ¿Qué sabemos de esa mujer, señor Noel, si la juzgamos por su propia confesión cuando vino a vernos caracterizada como señorita Garth y por sus actos posteriores en Aldborough? Sabemos que, si la muerte no hubiera arrebatado al padre de usted de sus manos, tenía preparada una conspiración para robarle el dinero de Combe-Raven. Sabemos que cuando usted heredó el dinero, tenía preparada una conspiración para robárselo a usted. Sabemos que llevó la conspiración hasta sus últimas consecuencias, y sabemos que sólo le falta que usted muera para coronar con éxito su rapacería y su engaño. Estamos seguros de todo eso. Estamos seguros de que es joven, audaz e inteligente, de que no tiene dudas ni escrúpulos ni piedad, y de que posee las cualidades personales que los hombres en general (¡lo que me resulta absolutamente incomprensible!) son lo bastante débiles para admirar. Esto no son fantasías, señor Noel, sino hechos; usted los conoce tan bien como yo.

Él hizo un gesto afirmativo y la señora Lecount continuó:

- Recuerde lo que acabo de decir sobre el pasado y mire ahora conmigo hacia el futuro. Espero y confío en que aún le queden muchos años de vida, pero supongamos, sólo por un momento, que usted muere y que a su muerte queda este testamento que lega su fortuna a su primo George. Según tengo entendido existe una oficina en Londres en la que deben guardarse copias de todos los testamentos. Cualquier desconocido curioso que decida pagar un chelín por ese privilegio puede entrar en esa oficina y leer a su discreción cualquiera de los testamentos que hay allí. ¿Adivina usted por dónde voy, señor Noel? Su desheredada viuda paga el chelín y lee su testamento. Su desheredada viuda ve que el dinero de Combe-Raven, que usted ha recibido de su padre, pasa de usted a George Bartram. ¿Cuál será el resultado cierto de ese descubrimiento? El resultado será que dejará usted a su primo y amigo el legado de la venganza y el engaño de esa mujer, y la exasperación por su fracaso hará esa venganza más decidida y ese engaño más diabólico que nunca. ¿Qué es su primo George? Es un hombre generoso y confiado, incapaz de falsedad alguna, que no teme ser engañado por los demás. Déjelo a merced de los encantos sin escrúpulos y de la impenetrable falsedad de su mujer, ¡y veo el resultado tan claro como lo veo a usted ahí sentado! Le pondrá una venda en los ojos, como hizo con usted, ¡y se apoderará del dinero, pasando por encima de usted y de mí!

La señora Lecount hizo una pausa y dejó que su amo asimilara estas últimas palabras. Las circunstancias estaban expuestas de forma tan clara y la conclusión que se extraía de ellas era tan evidente que Noel Vanstone comprendió lo que la señora Lecount quería decir sin esfuerzo y de manera inmediata.

- ¡Comprendo! -dijo, apretando los puños con expresión vengativa-. ¡Comprendo, Lecount! No conseguirá un solo penique. ¿Qué he de hacer? ¿Le dejo el dinero al almirante? -Se detuvo a reflexionar-. No -prosiguió-, existe el mismo peligro dejándole el dinero al almirante que dejándoselo a George.

- No existe tal peligro, señor Noel Vanstone, si sigue usted mi consejo.

- ¿Cuál es?

- Ponga en práctica su idea, señor. Vuelva a empuñar la pluma y deje el dinero al almirante Bartram.

Él hundió la pluma en el tintero maquinalmente y luego vaciló.

- Sabrá usted adonde iremos a parar, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-, antes de que firme el testamento. Mientras tanto, vayamos ganando terreno mientras continuamos. Quiero que el testamento esté redactado antes de avanzar en nuestros asuntos. Empiece el tercer párrafo, señor Noel, bajo las líneas que me legan las cinco mil libras.

La señora Lecount dictó la última sentencia trascendental del testamento (del borrador que obraba en su poder) con las siguientes palabras:

Nombro heredero universal del resto de mis bienes, tras el pago de los gastos de mi entierro y de mis deudas legales, al contraalmirante Arthur Everard Bartram, mi albacea antes mencionado, para que él les dé el uso que crea conveniente.

Firmado, sellado y entregado en el día de hoy, tres de noviembre de mil ochocientos cuarenta y siete, por Noel Vanstone, testador antes mencionado, como y para su última voluntad y testamento, en presencia de nosotros.

- ¿Eso es todo? -preguntó Noel Vanstone, atónito.

- Es bastante, señor, para legar su fortuna al almirante y, por tanto, es todo. Ahora volvamos al caso que ya hemos supuesto. Su viuda paga el penique y ve este testamento, en el que se dice que el dinero de Combe-Raven ha pasado al almirante y se manifiesta claramente que puede hacer con él lo quiera. Cuando ella lo lea, ¿qué hará? Tenderá su trampa al almirante. Es soltero y es viejo. ¿Quién le protegerá contra las artes de esa mujer desesperada? Protéjalo usted mismo, señor, con unos cuantos trazos más de esa pluma que ya ha hecho maravillas. Le ha nombrado heredero en el testamento que verá su mujer. Desherédele en una carta que sea un absoluto secreto entre el almirante y usted. Meta el testamento y la carta en un sobre y hágaselo llegar al almirante indicándole por escrito que debe romper el sello el día en que usted muera. Que el testamento quede tal como está ahora y que la carta (que es un secreto entre usted y él) le diga la verdad. Explíquele que le lega usted su fortuna con la petición de que la reciba con una mano y se la entregue con la otra a su sobrino George. Dígale que las esperanzas de usted en este asunto descansan únicamente en la confianza que tiene en su honor y en la convicción de que recuerda con afecto al padre de usted y a usted mismo. Usted conoce al almirante desde que era niño. Tiene sus manías y caprichos, pero es un caballero de la cabeza a los pies y es totalmente incapaz de traicionar la confianza depositada en su honor por un amigo muerto. Aborde la dificultad audazmente con esta estratagema y salvará a esos dos hombres desamparados de las trampas de su mujer, a uno por medio del otro. Aquí, a un lado, está su testamento que nombra heredero al almirante y motivará una nueva conspiración de su mujer. Y aquí, al otro lado, está su carta, ¡que pone el dinero secretamente en manos del sobrino!

La rencorosa destreza de esta combinación era exactamente del género que Noel Vanstone podía apreciar mejor. Intentó manifestar su aprobación y su admiración con palabras. La señora Lecount alzó la mano para silenciarle.

- Aguarde, señor, antes de expresar su opinión -prosiguió-. Todavía no hemos vencido la dificultad más que a medias. Supongamos que el almirante ha dado a su herencia el uso que usted le había solicitado confidencialmente que le diera. Tarde o temprano, por muy bien que se guarde el secreto, su esposa descubrirá la verdad. ¿Qué consecuencia se deriva de ese descubrimiento? Su esposa pone cerco al señor George. Todo lo que ha conseguido usted es legarle el dinero de un modo indirecto. Ahí está, después de un intervalo de tiempo, tan a merced de su esposa como si le hubiera nombrado usted heredero universal en este testamento. ¿Cuál es el remedio? El remedio consiste en engañarla por segunda vez, interponer un obstáculo entre ella y el dinero para proteger a su primo George. ¿Adivina usted, señor Noel, cuál es el obstáculo más prometedor que podemos poner en el camino de su mujer?

Él meneó la cabeza. La señora Lecount sonrió y le sobresaltó poniéndole la mano sobre el brazo, lo que le obligó a prestarle toda su atención.

- ¡Ponga una mujer en su camino, señor! -susurró con su tono más astuto-. Nosotras las mujeres no creemos en esa fascinadora belleza, diga usted lo que diga. Nuestros labios no arden en deseos de besar sus suaves mejillas. Nuestros brazos no ansían rodear esa cintura flexible. Nosotras vemos claramente sus intenciones pese a sus sonrisas y sus favores y su corsé y sus rellenos; ¡a nosotras no puede embrujarnos! ¡Ponga una mujer en su camino, señor Noel! Pero no una mujer como yo, una sirvienta en una situación de impotencia, sino una mujer con la autoridad y los celos de una esposa. En la carta al almirante, ponga como condición para que el señor George reciba la herencia que se case en un determinado período, si todavía es soltero cuando muera el almirante. Supongamos que permanece soltero pese a su condición, ¿quién recibirá entonces el dinero? Una vez más, ponga a una mujer en el camino de su esposa, y deje su fortuna a la hermana casada de su primo George.

La señora Lecount hizo una pausa. Noel Vanstone intentó de nuevo expresar su opinión y de nuevo la mano de la señora Lecount le hizo enmudecer.

- Si lo aprueba, señor Noel -dijo-, daré su aprobación por supuesta. Si tiene algo que objetar, responderé a su objeción antes de que salga de su boca. Podría usted decirme: si esa condición servirá ya a nuestros propósitos, ¿por qué ocultarla en una carta confidencial para el almirante? ¿Por qué no hacer heredero a mi primo y ponerle esa condición en el mismo testamento? Por una única razón, señor. Porque hacerlo en secreto es el único modo seguro con una mujer como su esposa. Cuanto más secretas sean las intenciones de usted, más tiempo la obligará a perder en descubrirlas por sí misma. Ese tiempo que ella pierde es tiempo ganado en proteger al almirante de sus supercherías, tiempo ganado por el señor George (si sigue soltero) para elegir a su dama sin ser molestado y tiempo ganado para la seguridad de la mujer elegida, que de lo contrario podría convertirse en el primer objetivo de las sospechas y la hostilidad de la señora de Noel Vanstone. Recuerde el frasco que hemos descubierto arriba y mantenga a esa desesperada mujer en la ignorancia, e inofensiva por tanto, el mayor tiempo posible. Ése es mi consejo, señor Noel, en pocas palabras. ¿Qué opina, señor? ¿Soy casi tan inteligente a mi manera, como su amigo el señor Bygrave? ¿Puedo conspirar yo también un poquito cuando el propósito de mi conspiración es ayudarle a cumplir con sus deseos y proteger a sus amigos?

Haciendo uso por fin del permiso para usar la lengua, Noel Vanstone expresó su admiración por la señora Lecount exactamente con las mismas palabras pronunciadas en una ocasión anterior para hacer sus cumplidos al capitán Wragge. «¡Qué cerebro tiene usted!» fueron esas agradecidas palabras otrora dirigidas al enemigo más acérrimo de la señora Lecount. Esas mismas utilizó ahora para darle las gracias a la propia señora Lecount. Los extremos se tocan, ¡y tal es a veces la aprobación de un tonto, que todo lo abarca!

- Permita a mi cerebro que se haga merecedor del cumplido que acaba de hacerle, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. La carta al almirante aún no está escrita. Este testamento que tenemos aquí es como un cuerpo sin alma, un Adán sin Eva, hasta que se haya redactado la carta y colocado junto a él. Un poco más de dictado por mi parte y un poco más de escritura por la suya, y nuestra tarea habrá concluido. Discúlpeme. La carta será más larga que el testamento, necesitamos hojas más grandes.

Se buscó el estuche de papel de cartas y se hallaron en él hojas del tamaño adecuado. La señora Lecount reanudó el dictado y Noel Vanstone volvió a empuñar la pluma.

Baliol Cottage, Dumfries,

3 de noviembre de 1847

Confidencial

Querido almirante Bartram:

Cuando abra usted mi testamento (en el que se le nombra mi único albacea), descubrirá que también le he nombrado a usted heredero universal de todos mis bienes tras el pago de un legado de cinco mil libras. El propósito de esta carta es comunicarle confidencialmente el objetivo con el que he depositado mi fortuna en sus manos.

Le ruego que tome nota de que es mi intención que entregue este gran legado a su sobrino George con ciertas condiciones. Si su sobrino está casado en el momento de mi muerte y su mujer vive, le pido que le haga entrega inmediata de la herencia, al tiempo que le transmita mi deseo (que considerará un deber sagrado, estoy convencido) de que ceda ese dinero a su mujer y a sus hijos, si los tiene. Si, por el contrario, no está casado en el momento de mi muerte o es viudo, en ambos casos pongo como condición para que reciba la herencia que se case en un período de...

La señora Lecount dejó el borrador de la carta que había estado dictando e informó con un gesto a Noel Vanstone de que podía dejar descansar la pluma.

- Hemos llegado a la cuestión del tiempo, señor -señaló-. ¿Cuánto tiempo le concederá a su primo para casarse si es soltero o viudo cuando usted muera?

- ¿Le doy un año? -preguntó Noel Vanstone.

- Si no tuviéramos ninguna otra consideración más que la del debido decoro -dijo la señora Lecount-, también yo propondría un año, señor, especialmente si se diera el caso de que el señor George fuera viudo. Pero tenemos que pensar en su mujer, además de prestar atención al decoro. Un año de demora entre la muerte de usted y el matrimonio de su primo es un intervalo de tiempo peligrosamente largo para dejar la posesión de su fortuna en el aire. Déle a una mujer resuelta un año para conspirar y maquinar, y es imposible decir lo que no podrá hacer.

- ¿Seis meses? -sugirió Noel Vanstone.

- Seis meses, señor -replicó la señora Lecount-, es un intervalo preferible. Un intervalo de seis meses desde el día de su muerte bastará para que el señor George... Parece usted alterado, señor. ¿Qué le ocurre?

- Desearía que no mencionara mi muerte a cada momento -espetó él con irritación-. ¡No me gusta! ¡Detesto oír esa palabra!

La señora Lecount sonrió resignadamente y consultó su borrador.

- Veo aquí escrita la palabra «fallecimiento» -señaló-. ¿Quizá la prefiera usted, señor Noel?

- Sí -respondió él-. Prefiero «fallecimiento». No suena tan horrible como «muerte».

- Sigamos con la carta, señor.

La señora Lecount reemprendió el dictado como sigue:

... en ambos casos pongo como condición para que reciba la herencia que se case en un período de seis meses civiles desde el día de mi fallecimiento, que la mujer con la que se case no sea viuda, que se lean las amonestaciones y que el enlace matrimonial se celebre públicamente en la parroquia de Ossory, donde es conocido desde la infancia y donde es probable que la familia y las circunstancias de su futura esposa sean objeto del interés y la curiosidad públicos.

- Esto, señor -dijo la señora Lecount, alzando la vista del borrador-, servirá para proteger al señor George en el caso de que le tiendan la misma trampa en la que ha caído usted. La próxima vez su esposa no podrá asumir una personalidad y un nombre falsos con tanta facilidad, no, ¡ni siquiera con ayuda del señor Bygrave! Vuelva a mojar la pluma, señor Noel; escribamos el siguiente párrafo. ¿Listo?

- Sí.

La señora Lecount prosiguió:

Si su sobrino no cumple estas condiciones, es decir, si siendo soltero o viudo en el momento de mi fallecimiento, no se casa siguiendo al pie de la letra mis instrucciones dentro de los seis meses civiles siguientes, es mi deseo que no reciba la herencia ni parte de ella. En ese supuesto caso, le pido que lo descarte completamente y legue la fortuna que le dejo en mi testamento a la hermana casada de su sobrina, la señora Girdlestone.

Tras haberle hecho partícipe de mis motivos e intenciones, llego al siguiente punto que es preciso considerar. Si cuando usted abra esta carta, su sobrino es un hombre soltero, evidentemente es indispensable que conozca las condiciones impuestas tan pronto como las conozca usted mismo, a ser posible. En tales circunstancias, es usted libre de comunicarle lo que le escribo aquí, o bien habrá usted de darle la impresión de que no existe tal manifestación escrita y confidencial de mis deseos, estableciendo todas las condiciones referentes a su matrimonio como si procedieran enteramente de usted mismo.

Si adopta usted esta última alternativa, añadirá uno más a los muchos motivos de agradecimiento que deberé a su amistad.

Tengo serias razones para creer que la posesión de mi dinero y el descubrimiento de cualquier disposición especial concerniente a su cesión serían objeto (tras mi fallecimiento) del fraude y la conspiración de una persona sin escrúpulos. Es mi mayor preocupación, por tanto (por el bien de usted en primer lugar), que no se suscite la menor sospecha sobre la existencia de esta carta en la persona a la que aludo. Y de la misma forma deseo (en bien de la señora Girdlestone en segundo lugar) que esa misma persona ignore por completo que la herencia pasará a manos de la señora Girdlestone si su sobrino no se casa en el plazo dado. Conozco el carácter afable y dócil de George, temo las intrigas que puedan intentarse contra él, y estoy seguro de que lo más prudente será abstenerse de confiarle secretos que podría revelar imprudentemente, lo cual tendría graves e incluso peligrosos resultados.

Comunique las condiciones a su sobrino, por tanto, como si fueran personales. Déjele creer que se las han sugerido sus nuevas responsabilidades como hombre de fortuna, como albacea de mi testamento y como resultado de una lógica preocupación por asegurar la perpetuación del apellido familiar. Si estas razones no bastan para contentarle, nada podrá objetar a que le remita al mismo día de su boda para cualquier otra explicación que desee.

He terminado. Le he transmitido mis últimos deseos con una confianza implícita en su honor y en el afectuoso respeto que siente por la memoria de su amigo. Nada diré de las deplorables circunstancias que me han impelido a escribir esta carta. Las oirá usted, si conservo la vida, de mis propios labios, pues será el primer amigo al que consultaré en estos difíciles momentos de aflicción. Mantenga esta carta en el más absoluto secreto y en su poder hasta que se cumplan mis exigencias. Que ningún otro ser humano salvo usted conozca el lugar en que se oculta bajo ningún pretexto.

Afectuosamente suyo,

NOEL VANSTONE

- ¿Ha firmado, señor? -preguntó la señora Lecount-. Déjeme repasar la carta, por favor, antes de sellarla.

El ama de llaves leyó la carta detenidamente. La letra apretada de Noel Vanstone llenaba dos páginas de papel grande y terminaba al empezar la tercera página. En lugar de usar un sobre, la señora Lecount la dobló con pulcra eficiencia, al modo antiguo. Encendió la vela del tintero y devolvió la carta al que la había escrito.

- Séllela, señor Noel -dijo-, con su propia mano y su propio sello. -La señora Lecount apagó la vela y ofreció de nuevo la pluma a su amo-. Dirija la carta -prosiguió- a «Almirante Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh, Essex». Ahora añada estas palabras encima de la dirección y fírmelas: «Para guardar en su poder y ser abierta únicamente por usted el día de mi muerte (o fallecimiento, si lo prefiere). Noel Vanstone». ¿Lo ha hecho? Déjeme verlo otra vez. Totalmente correcto. Le felicito, señor. Si no hemos conseguido que hayan terminado los días de conspiradora de su esposa para hacerse con el dinero de Combe-Raven, no será por culpa suya, señor Noel, ¡ni mía tampoco!

Relajada su atención tras haber terminado la carta, Noel Vanstone volvió de inmediato a consideraciones puramente personales.

- Ahora hay que pensar en mi equipaje -dijo-. No puedo irme sin mi ropa de abrigo.

- Discúlpeme, señor -replicó la señora Lecount-, primero hay que firmar el testamento y hay que encontrar a dos personas que actúen como testigos en el momento de la firma. -Miró por la ventana delantera y vio el carruaje aguardando a la puerta-. El cochero servirá -dijo-. Realiza un servicio respetable y se le localiza con facilidad en caso necesario. Supongo que tendremos que aceptar a una de sus criadas como segundo testigo. Son todas mujeres detestables, pero la cocinera es la que parece más inofensiva de las tres. Mande llamar a la cocinera, señor, mientras yo salgo a llamar al cochero. Cuando tengamos aquí a los testigos, sólo tiene que decirles estas palabras: «Tengo que firmar un documento y deseo que escribáis en él vuestros nombres como testigos de mi firma». ¡Nada más, señor Noel! Diga esas pocas palabras hablando con normalidad y, cuando haya firmado, yo personalmente me ocuparé del equipaje y de su ropa de abrigo.

La señora Lecount se dirigió a la puerta principal y llamó al cochero a la salita. A su regreso, halló a la cocinera en la habitación. La cocinera parecía ofendida por alguna misteriosa razón y no dejaba de mirar a la señora Lecount. Instantes después entraba el cochero, un hombre ya mayor. Le precedía un fuerte olor a whisky, pero tenía la cabeza de un escocés, y no había nada que lo delatara salvo el olor.

- Tengo que firmar un documento -dijo Noel Vanstone, repitiendo la lección- y deseo que escribáis en él vuestros nombres como testigos de mi firma.

El cochero miró el testamento. La cocinera no le quitaba los ojos de encima a la señora Lecount.

- No le molestará, señor… -dijo el cochero. La cautela autóctona se manifestaba en cada una de las arrugas de su rostro-. ¿No le molestará, señor, decirme primero qué documento es ése?

La señora Lecount intervino antes de que la indignación de Noel Vanstone se expresara con palabras.

- Debe decirle usted a este hombre que se trata de su testamento -dijo-. Cuando firme como testigo podrá verlo por sí mismo si observa el principio de la página.

- Sí, sí -dijo el cochero, mirando el principio de la página inmediatamente-. Su última

voluntad y testamento. ¡Mal asunto, señores! ¡Es un terrible desafío a la Muerte un documento como ése! Polvo somos -continuó, exhalando una nueva bocanada de whisky y alzando la vista devotamente hacia el techo-. Considere estas palabras en relación con ese otro pasaje de las Escrituras: Muchos son los llamados, pero pocos los elegidos. Considere de nuevo esas palabras en relación con el Apocalipsis, capítulo primero, versículos uno al quince. Medítenlo todo bien. ¿Qué son entonces todas sus riquezas? ¡Escoria, señores! ¿Y su cuerpo? (volvemos a las Escrituras). ¡Arcilla para el alfarero! ¿Y su vida? (las Escrituras una vez más) ¡El aire que respiran!

La cocinera escuchaba como si estuviera en la iglesia, pero sin apartar la vista de la señora Lecount.

- Será mejor que firme, señor. Al parecer ésta es una costumbre que impera en Dumfries durante las transacciones -dijo la señora Lecount resignadamente-. Creo que el hombre tiene buena intención.

Añadió estas últimas palabras en tono apaciguador, pues percibía que la indignación de Noel Vanstone se estaba convirtiendo rápidamente en alarma. Las exhortaciones del cochero parecían inspirarle miedo además de repugnancia.

Noel Vanstone mojó la pluma en tinta y firmó el testamento sin pronunciar una palabra. El cochero (descendiendo instantáneamente de la teología a los asuntos terrenales) contempló la firma con escrupulosa atención y firmó después como testigo con un comentario implícito sobre aquel proceder en forma de bocanada de whisky exhalada por medio de un hondo suspiro. La cocinera apartó la vista de la señora Lecount con esfuerzo, firmó con colérica premura y volvió a mirarla con un respingo, como si esperara ver una pistola en las manos del ama de llaves (que pudiera haber sacado en el intervalo de la firma).

- Gracias -dijo la señora Lecount con gran amabilidad. La cocinera apretó los labios agresivamente y miró a su amo.

- ¡Puedes irte! -dijo él. La cocinera tosió despectivamente y salió.

- No le haremos esperar mucho -dijo la señora Lecount al despedir al cochero-. Dentro de media hora, más o menos, estaremos listos para emprender el viaje de vuelta.

El austero semblante del cochero se relajó por primera vez. Sonrió enigmáticamente y se acercó a la señora Lecount de puntillas.

- No olvide una cosa, milady -dijo con meliflua cortesía-. ¡No olvide la firma además del trayecto, cuando me pague por el trabajo del día! -Se echó a reír con gravedad gutural y, dejando su atmósfera tras de sí, salió con paso majestuoso de la habitación.

- Lecount -dijo Noel Vanstone, tan pronto como el cochero cerró la puerta-. ¿He oído que le decía a ese hombre que estaremos listos dentro de media hora?

- Sí, señor.

- ¿Está usted ciega?

Acompañó la pregunta de un airado golpe en el suelo con el pie. La señora Lecount lo miró con asombro.

- ¿Es que no ve que ese animal esta borracho? -prosiguió él cada vez más irritado-. ¿No vale nada mi vida? ¿Ha de quedar a merced de un cochero borracho? ¡No pienso confiar mi seguridad a ese hombre bajo ningún concepto! Me sorprende que haya podido pensar lo contrario, Lecount.

- El hombre ha estado bebiendo, señor -dijo el ama de llaves-. Eso es fácil de ver y de oler. Pero es evidente que está acostumbrado a beber. Y si está lo bastante sereno para caminar derecho (lo que ciertamente hace) y para estampar su firma con letra clara (lo cual puede ver por usted mismo en el testamento), me atrevo a pensar que está lo

bastante sereno para llevarnos a Dumfries.

- ¡Ni hablar! Usted es extranjera, Lecount; no comprende a esta gente. Beben whisky de la mañana a la noche. El whisky es el alcohol más fuerte que se hace, el whisky es notorio por su efecto sobre el cerebro. Le digo que no pienso correr riesgos. Nunca me ha llevado y nunca me llevará un cochero que no esté sobrio.

- ¿Debo volver sola a Dumfries, señor?

- ¿Y dejarme aquí? ¿Dejarme solo en esta casa después de lo que ha ocurrido? ¿Cómo sé que mi mujer no volverá esta noche? ¿Cómo sé que su viaje no es un pretexto para engañarme? ¿Es que no tiene sentimientos, Lecount? ¿Me dejará solo en mi lamentable situación...? -Se desplomó en una silla y rompió a llorar ante la idea antes de haber terminado de expresarla-. ¡Qué pena! -dijo, tapándose la cara con el pañuelo-. ¡Qué pena!

Era imposible no compadecerlo. No podía haber otro mortal más digno de lástima. El conflicto entre las violentas emociones que se habían despertado en él desde la mañana, así como el esfuerzo de seguir a la señora Lecount por laberínticas e intrincadas combinaciones, había causado al fin su desmoronamiento. Ella le había conducido con firmeza, sosteniéndole mientras ese esfuerzo duraba; en el momento en que llegó a su fin, Noel Vanstone cayó. El cochero había acelerado un resultado del que estaba lejos de ser la causa.

- Me sorprende y me aflige usted, señor -dijo la señora Lecount-. Cálmese, se lo ruego. Me quedaré aquí con gusto si lo desea. Me quedaré esta noche por su bien. Necesita descanso y quietud después de este horrible día. Despediré al cochero inmediatamente, señor Noel. Le daré una nota para el dueño del hotel y el carruaje volverá a buscarnos mañana con un nuevo cochero a las riendas.

La perspectiva que ofrecían estas palabras animó a Noel Vanstone. Se enjugó los ojos y besó la mano de la señora Lecount.

- ¡Sí! -dijo débilmente-, despache al cochero y quédese usted aquí. ¡Qué buena es usted! ¡Excelente Lecount! Despache a ese animal borracho y vuelva en seguida. Nos sentaremos cómodamente ante el fuego, Lecount, y tomaremos una agradable cena ligera, e intentaremos que sea como en los viejos tiempos. -Su débil voz se quebró; regresó junto al fuego y volvió a deshacerse en lágrimas bajo la patética influencia de sus propias ideas.

La señora Lecount lo dejó solo un momento para despedir al cochero. Cuando regresó a la salita, encontró a su amo con la mano en la campanilla.

- ¿Qué quiere, señor? -preguntó.

- Quiero decirles a las criadas que preparen su habitación -respondió él-. Quiero mostrarle todo tipo de atenciones, Lecount.

- Es usted todo bondad, señor Noel, pero espere un momento. Sería mejor que guardáramos todos estos papeles antes de que entre la sirvienta. Si mete usted el testamento y la carta sellada en un sobre y lo dirige al almirante, me ocuparé personalmente de que el sobre llegue intacto a sus manos. ¿Quiere usted venir a la mesa sólo unos minutos más, señor Noel?

¡No! Noel Vanstone se mostró obstinado, se negó a alejarse de la chimenea, estaba harto y cansado de escribir, deseaba no haber nacido y aborrecía la visión de la pluma y la tinta. La señora Lecount precisó de toda su paciencia y toda su persuasión para convencerle de que escribiera la dirección del almirante por segunda vez. Sólo lo consiguió llevándole el sobre en blanco sobre el estuche de papel de cartas y poniéndolo con mucha zalamería sobre su regazo. Noel Vanstone gruñó, llegó a jurar incluso, pero escribió al fin en el sobre: «Para el almirante Bartram, St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. Entregado

por la señora Lecount». Con este último acto de obediencia, se extinguió su docilidad. Se negó rotundamente a sellar el sobre.

No había necesidad de apremiarle para que lo hiciera. Su sello se hallaba sobre la mesa y poco importaba que lo usara él o una persona de su confianza. La señora Lecount selló el sobre con los dos importantes documentos seguros en su interior.

Abrió su bolsa de viaje por última vez y, haciendo una breve pausa antes de guardar el sobre sellado, lo miró con una indescriptible sensación de triunfo. Sonrió al dejarlo caer al interior de la bolsa. Nada turbó sus pensamientos, ni la sombra de sospecha de que el testamento pudiera contener frases superfluas y expresiones que ningún abogado de profesión hubiera utilizado, ni el vestigio de una duda sobre si la carta era un documento tan completo como el que hubiera redactado un abogado de profesión. Cegada por una confianza nacida de su odio hacia Magdalen y de su ansia vengativa, cegada por la confianza en sus propias habilidades y en los conocimientos legales de su amigo, depositaba todo el futuro en la promesa del trabajo realizado por la mañana.

Noel Vanstone tocó la campanilla cuando ella cerró la bolsa de viaje. En esta ocasión fue Louisa quien acudió a la llamada.

- Prepara la habitación libre -ordenó su amo-; esta señora dormirá aquí esta noche. Y airea mi ropa de abrigo; esta señora y yo nos vamos mañana por la mañana.

La educada y dócil Louisa recibió las órdenes en hosco silencio, lanzó una mirada furiosa a la impenetrable invitada y salió de la estancia. Era evidente que las tres sirvientas estaban a favor de su señora y de que su opinión era unánime sobre la señora Lecount.

- ¡Hecho! -dijo Noel Vanstone, con un suspiro de infinito alivio-. Venga y siéntese, Lecount. Pongámonos cómodos, charlemos junto al fuego.

La señora Lecount aceptó la invitación y acercó un butacón para sentarse junto a él. Noel Vanstone le cogió la mano con ternura y la sostuvo así mientras charlaban. Un extraño que mirara por la ventana podría haberlos tomado por madre e hijo y hubiera pensado: «¡Qué hogar tan feliz!».

La charla, conducida por Noel Vanstone, consistió como de costumbre en una interminable sucesión de preguntas y estaba enteramente dedicada al tema de sí mismo y de sus perspectivas futuras. ¿Adonde le llevaría Lecount cuando se fueran a la mañana siguiente? ¿Por qué a Londres? ¿Por qué había de quedarse él en Londres mientras ella iba a St. Crux para entregarle al almirante la carta y el testamento? ¿Porque su esposa podía seguirle si iba a casa del almirante? Bueno, había algo de cierto en eso. ¿Y porque debería ocultarse de ella en algún alojamiento cómodo y seguro cerca del señor Loscombe? Pero ¿por qué cerca del señor Loscombe? Ah, sí, claro, para saber qué podía hacer la ley para ayudarle. ¿Le libraría la ley de la pérfida miserable que lo había engañado? ¡Qué molesto que Lecount no lo supiera! ¿Diría la ley que se había casado una segunda vez porque él y aquella pérfida miserable habían estado viviendo juntos en Escocia? Había oído decir que en Escocia cualquier cosa que tuviera públicamente apariencia de matrimonio era un matrimonio. ¡Qué sumamente molesto, por parte de Lecount, quedarse allí sentada diciendo que no tenía la menor idea! ¿Tendría que quedarse mucho tiempo solo en Londres sin nadie con quien hablar más que con el señor Loscombe? ¿Se reuniría Lecount con él tan pronto como hubiera entregado en mano aquellos importantes documentos al almirante? ¿Se consideraría Lecount todavía a su servicio? ¡La buena de Lecount! ¡Excelente Lecount! Y cuando acabara todo aquel asunto legal, ¿qué? ¿Por qué no abandonar esta horrorosa Inglaterra y marcharse de nuevo al extranjero? ¿Por qué no ir a Francia, a algún lugar barato cerca de París? ¿Digamos, Versalles? ¿Digamos, St. Germain? ¿En una bonita y pequeña casa francesa, barata? ¿Con una agradable *bonne* francesa que cocinara sin malgastar su fortuna en grasas? ¿Con un pequeño y bonito jardín donde él pudiera hacer ejercicio y recobrar la salud y ahorrarse el gasto de tener jardinero? No era una mala idea. Y parecía prometer mucho, ¿verdad, Lecount?

¡Así continuó el pobre! ¡Hombrecillo débil, abyecto y miserable!

Cuando empezó a anochecer al término del corto día de noviembre, Noel Vanstone empezó a sentir somnolencia, sus incesantes preguntas acabaron por fin y se durmió. En el exterior, el viento entonaba su fúnebre melodía invernal. Dejaron de oírse el ruido de pasos y el estrépito de las ruedas sobre la carretera, dando paso a un triste silencio. Noel Vanstone siguió durmiendo pacíficamente. Las llamas se reflejaban en su pequeño rostro marchito y sus manos inertes. La señora Lecount aún no había sentido lástima por él. Empezaba a sentirla ahora. Había logrado sus objetivos, su legado estaba garantizado mediante testamento; él había puesto su vida futura en sus manos maternales por voluntad propia. El fuego era agradable, las circunstancias eran favorables al desarrollo de los sentimientos cristianos. «¡Pobre desgraciado! -pensó la señora Lecount, mirándolo con compasión grave-. ¡Pobre desgraciado!»

Noel Vanstone se despertó a la hora de cenar. Se mostró alegre mientras comía, volvió a la idea de la casita barata en Francia, sonrió bobaliconamente y habló en francés con la señora Lecount mientras la criada y Louisa les atendían por turno y de mala gana. Después de la cena, Noel Vanstone volvió a su cómoda silla delante del fuego y la señora Lecount le imitó. Él reanudó la conversación, lo que en su caso significaba repetir las preguntas. Pero no era tan rápido ni estaba tan bien dispuesto como antes para hacerlas. Empezaron a languidecer, continuaron a intervalos cada vez más largos y cesaron por completo. Hacia las nueve volvió a quedarse dormido.

Esta vez no fue un sueño tranquilo. Mascullaba y hacía rechinar los dientes y volvía la cabeza de un lado a otro en la silla. La señora Lecount hizo ruido expresamente para que despertara. Él se despertó con la mirada perdida y las mejillas coloradas. Se paseó por la habitación con nerviosismo y una nueva idea en la cabeza, la de escribir a su mujer una carta terrible, de eterna despedida. ¿Cómo escribirla? ¿Qué lenguaje usaría para expresar sus sentimientos? ¡Ni el mismo Shakespeare con todo su talento daría la talla en esta emergencia! Había sido víctima de un ultraje sin parangón. ¡Una miserable se había adueñado de su corazón traidoramente! ¡Una víbora se había ocultado en su hogar! ¿Dónde hallar las palabras infamantes con que poder calificarla? Se interrumpió, con una sensación de sofoco producida por la rabia impotente, y blandió el puño trémulo en el aire.

La señora Lecount intervino con una energía y una decisión inspiradas por una seria alarma. Después de la fuerte tensión a la que había sido sometido el débil carácter de su amo, un arrebato de cólera como aquél podía arruinar su reposo aquella noche y sus fuerzas para viajar al día siguiente. Con infinitas dificultades e interminables promesas de que podría volver a hablar de ello por la mañana y recibir sus consejos, la señora Lecount consiguió persuadirle de que subiera a su dormitorio y se calmara para poder dormir. Le ofreció el brazo para sostenerle. De camino hacia el dormitorio y con gran alivio por parte de ella, una nueva idea absorbió su atención de repente. Recordó cierta combinación caliente y agradable de vino, huevo, azúcar y especias que el ama de llaves acostumbraba hacerle en otros tiempos y que le parecía que sería una delicia tomar antes de acostarse. La señora Lecount le ayudó a ponerse la bata y luego volvió a bajar para hacerle la bebida caliente junto al fuego de la salita.

El ama de llaves hizo sonar la campanilla y pidió en nombre de Noel Vanstone los ingredientes necesarios para la mezcla. Con el humilde ingenio malicioso de su casta, las criadas le llevaron los ingredientes uno a uno haciéndola esperar el máximo tiempo posible entre uno y otro. La señora Lecount disponía del cazo, la cuchara, el vaso y el rallador de nuez moscada, y del vino, pero no del huevo ni el azúcar ni las especies, cuando oyó a su amo paseándose airadamente de un lado a otro de su dormitorio, sin duda enardeciéndose de nuevo con la idea de la carta.

La señora Lecount subió una vez más, pero él fue más rápido, la oyó llegar y, cuando ella abrió la puerta, lo encontró astutamente sentado de espaldas. El ama de llaves lo conocía demasiado bien para intentar echarle una reprimenda, se limitó a anunciar la inminente llegada de la bebida caliente y se dio la vuelta para abandonar la habitación. Cuando salía se fijó en la mesa de un rincón, donde había tintero y estuche de papel de cartas, e intentó llevárselos sin atraer la atención de su amo; pero él fue más rápido una

vez más. Preguntó con enojo si dudaba de su promesa. Ella volvió a poner el recado de escribir sobre la mesa por miedo a ofenderle y abandonó la habitación.

Media hora más tarde la mezcla estaba preparada. La señora Lecount se la subió a su amo en un gran vaso humeante y aromático. «Después de tomarse esto se dormirá - pensó, al abrir la puerta-. Lo he hecho más fuerte de lo habitual a propósito.»

Noel Vanstone había cambiado de lugar. Estaba sentado a la mesa del rincón, todavía de espaldas, escribiendo. Esta vez su fino oído no le había ayudado. Esta vez la señora Lecount lo había pillado con las manos en la masa.

- ¡Oh, señor Noel, señor Noel! -le dijo con tono de reproche-. ¿En qué han quedado sus promesas?

Él no respondió. Estaba sentado con el codo izquierdo apoyado en la mesa y la cabeza sobre la mano izquierda. La mano derecha se apoyaba en el papel con la pluma suelta entre los dedos.

- Su bebida, señor Noel -dijo el ama de llaves suavizando su tono, pues no quería ofenderle. Él no le hizo caso.

La señora Lecount se acercó a la mesa para despertarlo. ¿O estaba sumido en honda reflexión?

Estaba muerto.

FIN DE LA QUINTA ESCENA

ENTREACTO

DESARROLLO DE LA HISTORIA A TRAVÉS DEL CORREO

I

DE LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE AL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE

Park Tenace, St. John's Wood,

5 de noviembre

Querido señor:

Vine a Londres ayer con el propósito de visitar a un pariente, dejando al señor Vanstone en Baliol Cottage y con la intención de regresar a su lado al cabo de una semana. Llegué a Londres ayer por la noche y vine en coche hasta aquí, donde había reservado alojamiento de antemano por escrito.

En el correo de esta mañana me ha llegado una carta de mi doncella, a la que dejé en Baliol Cottage con instrucciones de escribirme si ocurría algo fuera de lo normal en mi ausencia. Adjunto a ésta la carta de la chica. La conozco bastante bien y creo que puede confiarse plenamente en que dice la verdad.

Me abstengo a propósito de molestarle con comentarios inútiles sobre mí misma. Cuando lea la carta de mi doncella comprenderá la conmoción que me ha causado la noticia que contiene. Sólo puedo repetir mi absoluto convencimiento de que sus afirmaciones son ciertas. Estoy firmemente persuadida de que la antigua ama de llaves de mi marido lo encontró, abusó de su debilidad en mi ausencia y le convenció para que hiciera un nuevo testamento. Por lo que sé de esa mujer, no me cabe la menor duda de que ha utilizado su ascendiente sobre el señor Vanstone para despojarme, si ello es posible, de todo beneficio futuro sobre la fortuna de mi marido.

En tales circunstancias, es importantísimo -por más razones de las que es necesario mencionar aquí- que vea al señor Vanstone y tenga una conversación con él lo antes posible. Observará usted que mi doncella tuvo la cautela de dejar la carta abierta hasta el último momento en que pudo echarla al correo, aunque después no tuviera más noticias que darme que el hecho de que la señora Lecount iba a pasar la noche en la casa y que ella y el señor Vanstone la abandonarían juntos esta mañana. De no ser por esta última información, habría emprendido ya el viaje de regreso a Escocia. Tal como están las cosas, no acabo de decidirme sobre el siguiente paso que debo dar. El viaje a Dumfries después de que se haya ido el señor Vanstone me parece tan inútil como quedarme en Londres.

¿Sería usted tan amable de aconsejarme? Iré a verle a Lincoln's Inn a cualquier hora de esta tarde o de mañana que usted me señale. Esta mañana la tengo comprometida en otros asuntos. Tan pronto como envíe esta carta me dirigiré a Kensington a fin de averiguar si ciertas dudas que tengo sobre el medio por el que la señora Lecount ha podido descubrir a mi marido están fundamentadas. Si me hace usted el favor de responderme a vuelta de correo, volveré a St. John's Wood a tiempo para recibirla.

Le saluda atentamente,

MAGDALEN VANSTONE

II

DEL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE A LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE

Lincoln's Inn, 5 de noviembre

Querida señora:

Su carta y la carta adjunta me han causado gran preocupación y sorpresa. Asuntos urgentes me impiden recibirla a usted esta tarde o mañana por la mañana, pero si está de acuerdo en venir a las tres de la tarde de mañana, a esa hora me hallará usted a su disposición.

No me es posible dar una opinión definitiva hasta que conozca más detalles sobre el extraordinario asunto que me comunica usted en su carta y el que se expone en la carta de su doncella. Aun con esta reserva, sin embargo, me atrevo a sugerir que si se queda en Londres hasta mañana obtendrá otros resultados además de consultarme a mí. Existe al menos la posibilidad de que usted o yo recibamos más noticias sobre este extraño asunto con el correo de la mañana.

Le saluda atentamente,

III

DE LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

5 de noviembre, dos de la madrugada

Acabo de regresar de Westmoreland House tras haberla abandonado en secreto y haberla evitado a usted deliberadamente bajo su propio techo. Sabrá ahora por qué he ido allí y por qué me he marchado. El recuerdo de los viejos tiempos me impide tratarla como a una extraña, aunque jamás podré volver a tratarla como a una amiga.

El día tres emprendí viaje desde el norte hasta Londres. Mi único propósito al iniciar un viaje tan largo era el de visitar a Norah. Durante las últimas y fastidiosas semanas he sufrido tan grandes remordimientos como sólo desventuradas mujeres como yo pueden sufrir. Quizá ese sufrimiento me ablandó, quizá despertó en mí un viejo sentimiento de ternura olvidado, ¡sólo Dios lo sabe!, yo no puedo explicarlo, sólo puedo decirle que empecé a pensar en Norah de día y a soñar con ella de noche hasta que casi se me partió el corazón. No tenía más razón que ésa para correr el riesgo que corría al venir a Londres para verla. No deseo atribuirme méritos que no tengo; no deseo decirle que era la mujer reformada y arrepentida que usted hubiera aprobado. Sólo había en mí un sentimiento. Quería rodear el cuello de Norah con los brazos y llorar a lágrima viva sobre su pecho. Bastante infantil, quizá. Tal vez hubiera tenido sus consecuencias, tal vez no hubiera tenido ninguna, ¿quién sabe?

No tenía modo alguno de hallar a Norah sin la ayuda de usted. Por mucho que desaprobara lo que yo había hecho, pensé que no se negaría a ayudarme a encontrar a mi hermana. Cuando me acosté anoche en una cama extraña, pensé: «Le pediré a la señorita Garth que me lo diga en recuerdo a mis padres». No se imagina el consuelo que supuso para mí ese pensamiento. ¿Cómo podría imaginarlo? ¿Qué saben las mujeres buenas como usted de las miserables pecadoras como yo? Lo único que saben es rezar por nosotras en la iglesia.

Bien, me dormí felizmente anoche por primera vez desde que me casé. Al llegar la mañana, he pagado el castigo por atreverme a ser feliz una sola noche. Una carta ha llegado con el nuevo día en la que me dicen que mi enemigo más acérrimo en la tierra (se ha entrometido usted lo suficiente en mis asuntos para saber a quién me refiero) se ha vengado de mí en mi ausencia. Al seguir el impulso que me conducía a mi hermana, me he encaminado a la ruina.

El mal estaba ya hecho cuando he recibido la carta y nada podía hacer por remediar lo que hubiera ocurrido o lo que pueda ocurrir. En cualquier caso, he decidido insistir en mi determinación de ver a Norah antes de hacer otra cosa. Sospechaba que usted estaba involucrada en el desastre que me ha sobrevenido, puesto que en Aldborough me convencí de que usted y la señora Lecount se habían escrito. Pero jamás he sospechado de Norah.

Así pues, esta mañana he ido a Westmoreland House para pedirle la dirección de mi hermana y para confesar abiertamente que barruntaba que usted y la señora Lecount habían vuelto a cartearse.

Cuando he preguntado por usted en la puerta, me han dicho que había salido, pero que estaría pronto de vuelta. Me han preguntado si quería ver a su hermana, que se hallaba entonces en el aula de clases. Yo no deseaba que su hermana fuera molestada en modo alguno; nada tenía yo que ver con ella, sino con usted. He rogado que me permitieran esperarla en una habitación a solas hasta que usted regresara.

Me han introducido en la habitación doble de la planta baja dividida por cortinas, tal como yo la recordaba. El fuego estaba encendido en la habitación exterior, pero no así en la interior, y supongo que por esa razón estaban corridas las cortinas. La criada se ha mostrado muy cortés y atenta. He aprendido a agradecer la cortesía y las atenciones, y me he esforzado en mostrarme alegre al hablarle. Le he dicho: «Veré a la señorita Garth desde aquí cuando suba los escalones hasta la puerta y puedo hacerle señas de que entre a través del ventanal». La criada me ha dicho que podía hacerlo si llegaba usted por ese camino, pero que en ocasiones entraba usted en la casa por la puerta trasera del jardín, de la que tiene llave, y que en este último caso, se ocuparía de hacerle saber que yo la esperaba. Le explico estas menudencias para demostrarle que no había premeditado engaño alguno cuando he entrado en la casa.

Me he aburrido esperándola y usted no venía. No sé si era mi impaciencia la que me hacía pensarlo o si el enorme fuego que ardía en la chimenea caldeaba tanto la habitación como a mí me parecía. Sólo sé que después de un rato he atravesado las cortinas para probar el ambiente más fresco de la habitación interior.

Me he dirigido al ventanal que conduce al jardín de atrás y casi al mismo tiempo he oído que se abría la puerta de la habitación que acababa de dejar, así como la voz de usted y la de otra mujer, que no he reconocido. Me ha parecido que la desconocida era una de las internas. Por las primeras frases que han intercambiado, he deducido que se habían encontrado en el pasillo, ella cuando bajaba las escaleras, y usted cuando entraba por el jardín de atrás. La siguiente pregunta de ella y la respuesta de usted me han informado de que esa persona era amiga de mi hermana, de que tenía mucho interés por ella y de que sabía que usted acababa de visitarla. Hasta ese momento, yo he vacilado en mostrarme sólo porque en mi lamentable situación me horrorizaba enfrentarme con una desconocida, pero cuando he oído mi propio nombre inmediatamente después en sus labios y en los de ella, me he acercado deliberadamente a las cortinas que nos separaban y deliberadamente he escuchado.

¿Una acción ruin, dirá usted? Llámela ruin si quiere. ¿Qué otra cosa puede esperarse de una mujer como yo?

Siempre ha tenido usted fama de poseer una gran memoria. No es necesario que le repita lo que le ha dicho a su amiga ni lo que ella le ha dicho a usted hace apenas una hora. Cuando usted lea estas líneas, sabrá igual que yo lo que me han dicho esas palabras. No quiero saber los detalles; doy por supuestas todas sus razones y todas sus excusas. Me basta con saber que el señor Pendril y usted han estado buscándome otra vez y que ahora Norah también ha entrado en la conspiración para reformarme a pesar de mí misma. Me basta con saber que la carta que envié a mi hermana ha sido convertida en una trampa para cazarme y que la señora Lecount ha conseguido llevar a cabo su venganza gracias a la información recibida de labios de Norah.

¿Debo contarle lo que he sufrido al oír tales cosas? No, sería una pérdida de tiempo. Por grande que sea mi sufrimiento, me lo merezco, ¿no?

Conociendo mi propio temperamento colérico y no confiando en mí misma después de lo que había oído, he aguardado en esa habitación interior, temblando por miedo a que la criada le hablara de mi visita antes de que yo hallara una oportunidad de salir de la casa. No ha ocurrido tal desgracia. Sin duda la criada ha oído voces desde la cocina y ha supuesto que nos habíamos encontrado en el pasillo. No sé cuánto tiempo ha pasado hasta que usted ha abandonado la habitación para ir a quitarse el sombrero, el caso es que se ha ido, y su amiga con usted. He levantado la hoja del ventanal suavemente y he salido al jardín de atrás. He abandonado la casa por el mismo camino por el que usted ha regresado a ella. La criada no tiene culpa alguna. Como de costumbre, en cuanto a mí se refiere, nadie tiene la culpa sino yo.

Ha pasado tiempo suficiente para que me tranquilice un poco. ¿Sabe hasta qué punto soy fuerte? ¿Recuerda cómo luchaba contra todas mis enfermedades cuando era niña? Ahora que soy una mujer, lucho contra mis sufrimientos de la misma forma. ¡No me compadezca, señorita Garth! ¡No me compadezca!

No siento rencor hacia Norah. La esperanza de verla me ha sido arrebatada; el consuelo de escribirle se me niega en el futuro. Me siento herida en lo más vivo, pero no estoy enfadada con mi hermana. Su intención es buena, pobrecilla, creo que su intención es buena. Le afligiría enterarse de lo ocurrido. No se lo diga. Ocúltele mi visita y queme mi carta.

Un último mensaje para usted y habré terminado.

Si he entendido bien mi situación actual, sus espías todavía me buscan con tan poco éxito como en York. Despídalos, está malgastando su dinero inútilmente. Aunque me descubriera mañana, ¿qué podría hacer? Mi situación ha cambiado. Ya no soy la pobre chica, paria de la sociedad, ni la actriz vagabunda que intentaba encontrar en otro tiempo. He hecho lo que le dije que haría; esta vez he convertido el sentido general del decoro en mi cómplice. ¿Sabe quién soy? Una respetable mujer casada que a nadie tiene que responder de sus acciones bajo la capa del cielo salvo a su marido. Por fin he conseguido un lugar en el mundo y un nombre. ¡Incluso la ley, que es amiga de la gente respetable como usted, ha reconocido mi existencia y también se ha convertido en mi amiga! El arzobispo de Canterbury me dio la licencia para casarme, y el párroco de Aldborough celebró la boda. Si descubriera a sus espías siguiéndome en la calle y decidiera pedir protección contra ellos, la ley reconocería mi derecho. Olvida usted las maravillas que mi maldad ha hecho por mí. Ha convertido a la hija de nadie en la esposa de alguien.

Si sopesa usted estas consideraciones debidamente, si utiliza su excelente sentido común, no temeré verme obligada a apelar a mi amiga y protectora recién adquirida, la ley. Supongo que pensará que ha conseguido al fin algún provecho con su intromisión en mis asuntos. He perdido el cariño de Norah, mi marido me ha descubierto y la señora Lecount me ha vencido. Me ha llevado usted a tocar fondo, me ha fortalecido para presentar la batalla de mi vida con una determinación que sólo una mujer perdida y sin amigos puede sentir. ¡Pese a los pocos frutos que han dado sus intrigas, no han sido tan inútiles a pesar de todo!

No tengo nada más que decir. Si alguna vez le habla de mí a Norah, dígale que puede que llegue el día en que me vea de nuevo, el día en que las dos hermanas recobren sus derechos naturales, el día en que yo ponga la fortuna de Norah en sus manos.

Éstas son mis últimas palabras. Recuérdelas la próxima vez que se sienta tentada de entrometerse en mi vida.

MAGDALEN VANSTONE

IV

DEL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE A LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE

Lincoln's Inn, 6 de noviembre

Querida señora:

Sin duda el correo de esta mañana le habrá llevado la misma espantosa noticia que me ha traído a mí. Conocerá indudablemente la terrible desgracia que ha caído sobre usted, la de la súbita muerte de su marido.

Estoy a punto de salir en dirección al norte para realizar las averiguaciones pertinentes y cumplir aquellos deberes que considere apropiado emprender como abogado del difunto caballero. Permítame recomendarle seriamente que no me siga a Baliol Cottage hasta que yo haya tenido tiempo para escribirle y darle el consejo que no puedo darle ahora por mi ignorancia de todas las circunstancias. Puede usted contar con que le escribiré a mi llegada a Escocia con el primer correo.

Le saluda atentamente,

V

DEL SEÑOR PENDRIL A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

Serle Street, 6 de noviembre

Querida señorita Garth:

Le devuelvo la carta de la señora de Noel Vanstone. Comprendo que el tono con el que está escrita la haya mortificado y también su congoja por la manera en que esa desdichada mujer ha interpretado la conversación que oyó en su casa. No puedo añadir con sinceridad que lamente lo ocurrido. Mi opinión no ha variado desde la época de Combe-Raven. Creo que la señora de Noel Vanstone es una de las mujeres más temerarias, desesperadas y pervertidas que existen, y me alegro de cualquier circunstancia que la aleje de su hermana, por el bien de ésta.

No puede existir la menor duda sobre la conducta que debería usted adoptar. La propia señora de Noel Vanstone reconoce que es mejor ahorrar una angustia adicional e innecesaria. Por supuesto, debe usted ocultar a la señorita Vanstone la visita a Kensington y la carta que le ha seguido. No sólo sería una insensatez decírselo, sino una absoluta crueldad. Si tuviéramos algún que otro remedio que aplicar, o incluso una esperanza que ofrecer, podríamos vacilar en mantener nuestro secreto, pero no hay remedio ni esperanza. La señora de Noel Vanstone tiene toda la razón con respecto a su situación actual. Ni usted ni yo podemos reclamar el menor derecho a controlar su vida.

He tomado ya las medidas necesarias para poner fin a nuestras inútiles pesquisas. Dentro de unos días escribiré a la señorita Vanstone y haré todo lo posible por tranquilizar sus temores sobre su hermana. Si no consigo hallar pretextos que la satisfagan, será mejor que piense que no hemos encontrado nada a que sepa la verdad.

Le saluda atentamente,

WlLLIAM PENDRIL

VI

DEL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE A LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE

Lincoln's Inn, 15 de noviembre

Confidencial

Querida señora:

Atendiendo a su petición, paso a comunicarle por escrito lo que (de no ser por la calamidad que tan recientemente le ha acaecido) hubiera preferido decirle de viva voz. Le ruego que considere esta carta estrictamente confidencial.

Le adjunto, como deseaba, una copia del testamento efectuado por su difunto marido el día tres del corriente. No cabe la menor duda sobre la autenticidad del documento original. Por pura formalidad, puse reparos a que el abogado del almirante Bartram adoptara una posición de autoridad en Baliol Cottage, pero él la adoptó igualmente, actuando como representante legal del único albacea nombrado en el segundo testamento. Debo decir que yo hubiera hecho lo mismo en su lugar.

Debemos considerar ahora la siguiente cuestión de gran importancia: ¿qué podemos hacer para defender al máximo los intereses de usted? El testamento legalizado bajo mi supervisión el pasado treinta de septiembre ha sido sustituido y revocado por el segundo testamento más reciente, efectuado el tres de noviembre. ¿Podemos impugnar ese documento?

Después de estudiarlo, dudo de que se pueda impugnar el nuevo testamento. Sin duda está redactado de forma irregular, pero está fechado y firmado por el testador y los testigos tal como exige la ley, y las cláusulas absolutamente simples y directas que contiene no permiten ataque alguno que yo sepa ver.

Dadas las circunstancias, ¿podemos impugnar el testamento basándonos en que fue efectuado cuando el testador no se hallaba en condiciones de tomar decisiones sobre su propiedad, o bien porque el testador se hallaba sujeto a una influencia impropia e indebida?

En el primero de esos dos casos, las pruebas médicas serían un obstáculo en nuestro camino. No podemos sostener que una enfermedad previa hubiera debilitado las facultades mentales del testador. Es obvio que murió repentinamente, tal y como los médicos le habían dicho siempre que moriría, de una enfermedad coronaria. El día de su muerte salió como de costumbre a pasear por el jardín, cenó copiosamente, ninguna de las personas a su servicio notó cambio alguno en él; estaba un poco más irritable con ellas que de costumbre, pero eso es todo. Es imposible dudar del estado de sus facultades mentales; por el momento, no tenemos argumentos con que acudir a los tribunales.

¿Podemos declarar que actuó bajo una influencia indebida o, hablando claro, bajo la influencia de la señora Lecount?

Nuevamente se nos presentan serias dificultades. No podemos aducir, por ejemplo, que la señora Lecount se apropiara de un lugar en el testamento que no tuviera derecho a ocupar. Astutamente, ha limitado su propio legado no sólo a lo que en justicia le pertenecía, sino también a lo que el difunto señor Michael Vanstone en persona tenía la intención de dejarle. Si me interrogaran a mí, me vería obligado a reconocer que yo mismo le oí expresar esa intención. Lo cierto es que debería afirmar que le oí expresarla

en más de una ocasión. No hay base para la impugnación en el legado de la señora Lecount, así como tampoco la hay en la elección de albacea de su difunto marido. Hizo la elección más sensata y natural, la del amigo más antiguo y digno de confianza que tenía en el mundo.

Queda una última consideración por hacer, la más importante que aún no he abordado y que, por tanto, he reservado para el final. El treinta de septiembre, el testador legaliza un testamento por el que nombra a su viuda única albacea y le lega ochenta mil libras. El tres de noviembre siguiente, revoca este testamento expresamente y lo sustituye por otro en el que no se menciona a su viuda ni una sola vez y en el que se nombra heredero universal a un amigo tras el pago de un legado relativamente insignificante.

Depende de usted por entero decir si puede aducirse alguna razón válida para este extraordinario proceder. Si no hay tal razón -y yo no conozco ninguna-, creo que tenemos aquí una cuestión que merece ser examinada con sumo cuidado, pues podría ser la base de nuestra impugnación. Le ruego que tenga en cuenta que ahora apelo a usted únicamente como abogado que está obligado a afrontar todas las eventualidades posibles. No deseo entrometerme en sus asuntos privados, ni escribir una sola palabra que pueda ser interpretada como una crítica indirecta contra usted.

Si usted me dice que, por lo que sabe, su marido decidió caprichosamente dejarla fuera de su testamento, sin razón o motivo aparentes para tal decisión y sin ninguna otra explicación evidente sobre su conducta más que el hecho de que actuara de esa manera enteramente influido por la señora Lecount, me asesoraré jurídicamente de inmediato con respecto a la conveniencia de impugnar el testamento sobre esa base. Si, por el contrario, me dice usted que hay razones (que usted conoce y yo desconozco) para no emprender las acciones que propongo, aceptaré sus indicaciones sin molestarle pidiendo que se explique, a menos que lo desee. En este último caso, volveré a escribirle, pues tendré entonces algo más que decir con respecto al testamento que quizá constituya una gran sorpresa para usted.

Le saluda atentamente,

JOHN LOSCOMBE

VII

DE LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE AL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE

16 de noviembre

Querido señor:

Acepte mi más sincero agradecimiento por la amabilidad y consideración con que me ha tratado usted, y permita que mis preocupaciones actuales sirvan para disculparme por contestar a su carta sin ceremonias, en los términos más sencillos posibles.

Tengo mis propias razones para no vacilar en responder negativamente a su pregunta. Es imposible que recurramos a la ley, como usted propone, sobre la cuestión del testamento.

Agradeciéndole su atención, le saluda atentamente,

VIII

DEL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE A LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE

Lincoln's Inn, 17 de noviembre

Querida señora:

Acuso recibo de su carta, en la que responde negativamente a mi propuesta por razones personales. En estas circunstancias -sobre las que nada comentaré- paso a cumplir mi promesa de volver a escribirle para hablarle del testamento de su difunto marido.

Sea tan amable de repasar su copia del documento. Verá usted que la cláusula en la que se nombra heredero universal de los bienes de su marido al almirante Bartram termina con la siguiente frase: «Para que él les dé el uso que crea conveniente».

Por sencillas que le parezcan a usted, estas palabras son realmente peculiares. En primer lugar, ningún abogado de profesión las hubiera usado al redactar el testamento de su marido. En segundo lugar, no tienen valor alguno para ningún propósito claro y directo. Los bienes se legan al almirante sin condiciones, ¡y acto seguido se le dice que puede hacer con ellos lo que quiera! La frase apunta con claridad a una de dos conclusiones. O bien ha surgido de la pluma del testador por mera ignorancia, o bien ha sido colocada de forma deliberada donde aparece para servir de trampa. Estoy firmemente convencido de que esta última explicación es la correcta. La frase tiene la intención expresa de engañar a alguna persona -usted misma con toda probabilidad-, y la astuta persona que las ha puesto ahí se ha extralimitado en su astucia (como ocurre siempre que personas profanas pretenden entrar en cuestiones legales). Mis treinta años de experiencia dan un interpretación a la frase opuesta a la que intenta transmitir. Lo que digo es que el almirante Bartram no puede dar al legado el uso que crea conveniente; creo que está secretamente limitado por un documento complementario en forma de fideicomiso secreto.

Puedo explicarle con toda sencillez lo que es un fideicomiso secreto. Normalmente adopta la forma de carta del testador a sus albaceas, comunicándoles confidencialmente ciertas intenciones testamentarias que no ha considerado conveniente admitir abiertamente en el testamento. Por ejemplo, yo le dejo a usted cien libras y le escribo una carta confidencial por la que le ordeno que acepte la herencia no en beneficio propio, sino para dársela a una tercera persona cuyo nombre tengo razones para no mencionar en mi testamento. Eso es un fideicomiso secreto.

Si estoy en lo cierto al afirmar que en estos momentos obra en poder del almirante Bartram un documento como ése -convicción basada, en primer lugar, en las extraordinarias palabras que he citado y, en segundo lugar, en consideraciones de aspecto meramente legal con las que no es necesario llenar esta carta-, si mi opinión es cierta, digo, el descubrimiento de ese fideicomiso secreto sería, con toda probabilidad, muy importante para sus intereses. No la molestaré con detalles técnicos ni referencias a mi experiencia en tales materias que sólo un profesional podría entender. Me limitaré a decir que no doy su caso por perdido hasta que se demuestre que mi intuición es falsa.

Nada más puedo añadir mientras esta importante cuestión siga pendiente de resolución, ni tampoco puedo sugerir el modo de resolverla. Si se demostrara la existencia del fideicomiso y si yo conociera la naturaleza de las estipulaciones en él contenidas, podría entonces determinar con precisión las posibilidades legales de impugnar el testamento con argumentos convincentes, así como comunicarle si encuentro o no razones para llevar su caso personalmente tras llegar a un acuerdo con

usted.

Tal como están ahora las cosas, no puedo llegar a tal acuerdo ni ofrecerle consejo. Sólo puedo hacerle partícipe de mi opinión personal y dejarla a usted en entera libertad de sacar sus propias conclusiones, lamentando no poder darle mayores esperanzas ni ofrecerle un consejo definitivo. Todo lo que podía decir en conciencia sobre este asunto tan complejo y delicado lo he dicho.

Le saluda atentamente,

JOHN LOSCOMBE

P. D. He omitido una consideración en mi carta que menciono aquí para demostrarle que no se me ha escapado ninguno de los aspectos relacionados con este caso. Si hubiera sido posible demostrar que el señor Vanstone tenía su domicilio en Escocia en el momento de su muerte, podríamos haber reclamado sus derechos por medio de la ley escocesa, que no permite al marido desheredar por completo a la esposa. Pero es imposible demostrar que el señor Vanstone tuviera su domicilio legal en Escocia. Fue allí sólo como visitante; ocupaba una casa amueblada que había alquilado para pasar la temporada y no expresó jamás, de palabra u obra, la menor intención de establecerse en el norte definitivamente.

IX

DE LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE AL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE

Querido señor:

He leído su carta más de una vez con el más profundo interés y atención, y cuanto más la leo más convencida estoy de que existe una carta como la que usted menciona en poder del almirante Bartram.

Tengo interés en que se descubra tal hecho y le confieso que estoy resuelta a hallar el modo de realizar tal descubrimiento de manera secreta y efectiva. Mi decisión responde a motivos diferentes de los que usted podría considerar lógicos en mi caso. Se lo digo únicamente por si se siente inclinado a amonestarme. Me asisten buenas razones cuando le aseguro que tal amonestación sería completamente inútil.

No solicito su ayuda en este asunto. No molestaré a nadie pidiendo consejo. No se verá usted involucrado en ninguna acción temeraria por mi parte. Sea cual sea el peligro, lo afrontaré yo sola. Sean cuales sean las demoras, las soportaré pacientemente. Estoy sola y sin amigos y seriamente alterada, pero soy lo bastante fuerte para superar pruebas peores que ésta. Volveré a recobrar los ánimos y llegará mi oportunidad. Si ese fideicomiso secreto está en poder del almirante Bartram, la próxima vez que usted me vea, lo tendré en mis manos.

Con todo mi agradecimiento,

MAGDALEN VANSTONE

LA SEXTA ESCENA

St. John's Wood

CAPÍTULO I

Quedaba poco más de una semana para que llegara la Navidad, pero seguía sin haber señales de las heladas y nevadas que por tradición se asocian con la nueva estación. El tiempo era cálido a pesar de la época y el año viejo expiraba débilmente en medio de lluvias agotadoras y nieblas deprimentes.

En el atardecer de aquel día de diciembre, Magdalen estaba sentada sola en el alojamiento que ocupaba desde su llegada a Londres. El fuego ardía sin entusiasmo en la chimenea pequeña y angosta, las casas mojadas y los jardines inundados que se veían desde su ventana empezaban a desdibujarse deprisa en la penumbra, y la campanilla del repartidor de bollería del barrio tintineaba cansinamente en la distancia. Sentada muy cerca del fuego y con unas cuantas monedas en su regazo, Magdalen las movía distraídamente sobre la lisa superficie de su vestido alterando sin cesar la posición que ocupaban unas con respecto a las otras, como si intentara encajar las piezas de un rompecabezas infantil. La luz mortecina del fuego que llameaba de vez en cuando y la iluminaba débilmente mostraba cambios que habrían revelado a sus allegados las penurias pasadas. El vestido le colgaba formando bolsas, a causa de su enflaquecimiento, pero no se había preocupado de retocarlo. La antigua agitación de sus movimientos, la antigua movilidad de su expresión habían desaparecido. Su rostro tenía una serenidad pasiva y macilenta, una calma anormal e inmutable. Tal vez el señor Pendril habría suavizado sus duras críticas hacia ella de haberla visto entonces, y tal vez la señora Lecount, en la plenitud de su triunfo, se habría compadecido al fin de su enemiga caída.

Cuatro meses habían transcurrido apenas desde el día de su boda en Aldborough y ya había cumplido su castigo por ese día ¡pagándolo con vanos remordimientos, con una soledad sin esperanzas y una derrota irremediable! Que esto sea dicho en su favor, que en la verdad contada sobre el pecado cuente también la expiación. Que se sepa que no disfrutó secretamente de su triunfo cuando aquel día llegó. El horror que sentía hacia sí misma, inspirado por su propia acción, había alcanzado su punto culminante cuando logró el propósito de casarse. Jamás había sufrido tanto en silencio como el día en que el testamento de su marido la nombró heredera del dinero de Combe-Raven. Jamás los medios utilizados para lograr sus fines le habían parecido tan indescriptiblemente degradantes como el día en que los consiguió. De esas emociones había surgido el remordimiento que la había incitado a buscar perdón y consuelo en el amor de su hermana. Jamás desde que entrara en su corazón por vez primera, jamás desde que lo considerara como un deber sagrado junto a la tumba de su padre, había estado tan a punto de flaquear el propósito que se había jurado a sí misma. Jamás la influencia de Norah habría podido hacer tanto bien como el día en que esa influencia se perdió, el día en que Magdalen oyó las fatídicas palabras en casa de la señorita Garth, el día en que llegó la carta fatídica de Escocia en la que se le comunicaba la venganza de la señora Lecount.

El daño estaba hecho; la oportunidad se había perdido. Tiempo y esperanza habían pasado de largo por igual.

Las voces interiores le pedían ahora que se detuviera en su camino cuesta abajo. El

descubrimiento que había emponzoñado su corazón con la primera sospecha sobre su hermana, la noticia subsiguiente de la muerte de su marido, la herida del triunfo de la señora Lecount, que todo lo impregnaba, habían hecho su trabajo. El remordimiento que había amargado su vida de casada había quedado amortiguado, convertido en una sombría desesperación. Era demasiado tarde para expiar sus pecados mediante la confesión, demasiado tarde para desvelar al desgraciado marido los secretos más hondos que habían acechado en el corazón de su desdichada mujer. Aunque inocente de la espantosa traición que la señora Lecount le había imputado, era culpable de conocer la frágil salud de su marido al casarse con él; culpable de saber, cuando él le legó el dinero de Combe-Raven, que cualquier accidente inofensivo para otros hombres podía poner en peligro su vida y liberarla a ella. La muerte de Noel Vanstone le había revelado todo esto, le había dicho claramente lo que en vida de su marido se había negado a admitir ante sí misma. ¿Qué refugio le quedaba contra el sordo tormento de ese reproche, de la monótona tristeza de dudar de todo el mundo, incluso de Norah, de la amargura de su derrota, del solitario vacío de su vida sin amigos? Sólo había un refugio posible. Magdalen volvió al implacable propósito que la llevaba rápidamente a la ruina y le gritó con toda la osadía de su desesperación: ¡Llévame hacia delante!

Durante días y días desde que recibiera la carta del abogado, Magdalen había dirigido sus pensamientos hacia un único asunto. Durante días y días se había esforzado en resolver la primera dificultad de su situación: idear el modo de hallar el fideicomiso secreto. Esta vez no podía esperar ayuda del capitán Wragge. Una larga vida de intrigas había hecho del viejo miliciano un experto en el arte de desaparecer. El arado del agricultor moral no dejaba surcos, ¡no dejaba tras de sí ningún rastro! El señor Loscombe era demasiado prudente para comprometerse tomando parte activa en un asunto de ese tipo; se limitaba a mantener su opinión pasivamente y esperaba que su cliente lo hiciera todo, no quería saber nada hasta que el fideicomiso secreto estuviera en sus manos. Sólo Magdalen podía ocuparse ya de sus propios intereses. Arriesgado o no, lo que hiciera a continuación habría de hacerlo sola.

La perspectiva no la había desanimado. Sola había calculado las posibilidades. Sola había resuelto intentarlo.

«Ha llegado el momento -se dijo sentada frente al fuego-. Primero debo tantear a Louisa.»

Recogió las monedas de su regazo y las colocó en un pequeño montón sobre la mesa, luego se levantó e hizo sonar la campanilla. La patrona contestó a su llamada.

- ¿Está abajo mi criada? -preguntó Magdalen.

- Sí, señora, está tomando el té.

- Cuando termine, dígale que suba. Espere un momento. Encontrará su dinero sobre la mesa, el dinero que le debo de la semana pasada. ¿Lo ve o prefiere que encienda una vela?

- Está bastante oscuro, señora.

Magdalen encendió una vela.

- ¿Con qué antelación debo avisarle antes de irme? -preguntó, dejándola sobre la mesa.

- Una semana es lo normal, señora. Espero que no tenga nada que objetar a la casa.

- Nada en absoluto. Sólo se lo preguntaba porque quizá me vea obligada a abandonar este alojamiento antes de lo que había previsto. ¿Es correcta la suma?

- Totalmente, señora. Aquí tiene su recibo.

- Gracias. No se olvide de mandarme a Louisa en cuanto termine el té.

La patrona salió. Tan pronto como se halló de nuevo a solas, Magdalen apagó la vela y

acercó una silla vacía a la que ella ocupaba junto a la chimenea. Hecho esto, ocupó su asiento y esperó a que apareciera Louisa. Su rostro tenía una expresión dubitativa mientras miraba el fuego sin verlo. «Una remota posibilidad -pensó-. Pero por remota que sea, debo intentarlo.»

Diez minutos después oyó a Louisa llamar débilmente a la puerta. Al entrar en la habitación le sorprendió que no hubiera en ella más luz que la del fuego.

- ¿Quiere que encienda las velas, señora? -preguntó respetuosamente.

- Las encenderemos por ti, si quieres -respondió Magdalen-, pero no por mí. Tengo algo que decirte. Cuando lo haya dicho, tú decidirás si nos sentamos juntas a la luz o en la oscuridad.

Louisa aguardó cerca de la puerta y escuchó estas extrañas palabras con mudo asombro.

- Ven aquí -dijo Magdalen señalando la silla vacía-, ven aquí y siéntate.

Louisa avanzó hacia ella y tímidamente apartó la silla del lado de su señora. Magdalen la devolvió a su sitio al instante.

- ¡No! -dijo-. Más cerca, siéntate a mi lado. -Louisa obedeció tras un instante de vacilación.

- Te pido que te sientes a mi lado -prosiguió Magdalen- porque deseo hablarte de igual a igual. Cualquier diferencia que hubiera podido haber entre nosotras en otro tiempo, no existe ya. Soy una mujer sola y abandonada a su propia suerte, sin rango ni lugar en el mundo. Puede que sigamos juntas como amigas. Como señora y doncella, nuestra relación ha de acabar.

- ¡Oh, señora, no, no diga eso! -suplicó Louisa débilmente.

Magdalen continuó con pesar y firmeza.

- Cuando te vi por primera vez -dijo- pensé que no me gustarías. He acabado por apreciarte, he acabado por estarte agradecida. Has sido leal y buena conmigo de principio a fin. Lo mínimo que puedo hacer a mi vez es no interponerme en el camino de tus proyectos futuros.

- ¡No me despida, señora! -imploró Louisa-. Si me ayuda con un poco de dinero de vez en cuando, esperaré a que me pague mi salario cuando pueda. Lo digo en serio.

Magdalen le cogió la mano y prosiguió con el mismo pesar y la misma firmeza de antes.

- Mi futuro es oscuro e incierto -dijo-. El siguiente paso que daré puede llevarme a la prosperidad o a la ruina. ¿Acaso puedo pedirte que compartas semejante perspectiva? Si tu futuro fuera tan incierto como el mío, si también tú fueras una mujer sin amigos abandonada a su suerte, te permitiría compartirla conmigo con la conciencia tranquila. Podría aceptar tu afecto, pues no pensaría que te estaba perjudicando. ¿Cómo puedo pensar así en tu caso? Tú tienes un futuro esperanzador. Eres una excelente doncella, podrás encontrar otra colocación, una mucho mejor que la que tienes conmigo. Puedo darte referencias, y si las que yo te dé no se consideran suficientes, puedes dar las de la señora a la que serviste antes que a mí...

En el instante en que Magdalen pronunció aquel comentario sobre su antigua señora, Louisa retiró su mano bruscamente y se levantó de la silla, atemorizada. Se produjo un momento de silencio. Tanto la señora como la doncella habían sido tomadas por sorpresa.

Magdalen fue la primera en recobrarse.

- ¿Se está poniendo demasiado oscuro? -preguntó significativamente-. ¿Vas a encender las velas al final?

Louisa retrocedió hasta el rincón más oscuro de la estancia.

- ¡Sospecha usted de mí, señora! -respondió desde las sombras con un susurro entrecortado-. ¿Quién se lo ha dicho? ¿Cómo lo ha descubierto...? -Louisa se interrumpió y estalló en lágrimas-. Merezco sus sospechas -dijo, intentando tranquilizarse-. A usted no puedo negárselo. ¡Me ha tratado usted con tanta bondad y yo le he tomado tanto aprecio! Perdóneme, señora Vanstone, soy una miserable, la he engañado.

- Ven aquí y siéntate a mi lado otra vez -dijo Magdalen-. Ven, o me levantaré y te traeré yo misma.

Louisa volvió lentamente a su sitio. Parecía temer la luz del fuego, pese a que era mortecina. Se tapó el rostro con el pañuelo y permaneció lo más alejada posible de su señora cuando volvió a sentarse.

- Te equivocas al pensar que alguien te ha delatado -dijo Magdalen-. No sé más de ti que lo que me han dicho tu aspecto y tus modales. Llevas el peso de un terrible secreto en tu interior desde que entraste a mi servicio. Confieso que he hablado con el ánimo de averiguar algo más sobre ti y tu vida pasada de lo que he descubierto hasta ahora, no porque sienta curiosidad, sino porque también yo tengo mis pesares secretos. ¿Eres una mujer desgraciada como yo? Si lo eres, depositaré en ti mi confianza. Si no tienes nada que contarme, si prefieres guardar tu secreto, no te culparé, sólo diré: separémonos. No te preguntaré cómo me has engañado. Sólo recordaré que has sido una criada leal, honrada y eficiente mientras estuviste a mi servicio, y eso mismo diré en tu favor a cualquier otra señora a la que des mi nombre como referencia.

Magdalen aguardó respuesta. Por un instante, sólo por un instante, Louisa vaciló. La chica tenía una naturaleza débil, pero no depravada. Sentía un afecto sincero por su señora y habló con un valor que ésta no esperaba de ella.

- Si me despide usted, señora -dijo-, no aceptaré sus referencias hasta que le haya contado la verdad. No le pagaré su bondad engañándola por segunda vez. ¿Le contó el señor alguna vez cómo me contrató?

- No. Yo no se lo pregunté y él no me lo contó.

- Me contrató, señora, gracias a unas referencias escritas...

- ¿Sí?

- Las referencias eran falsas.

Magdalen se echó hacia atrás, asombrada. La confesión que acababa de oír no era la que ella esperaba.

- ¿Se negó tu señora a darte referencias? -preguntó-. ¿Por qué?

Louisa cayó de rodillas y ocultó el rostro en el regazo de su ama.

- ¡No me lo pregunte! -dijo-. Soy una miserable degenerada. ¡No soy digna de estar en la misma habitación que usted!

Magdalen se inclinó hacia ella y le susurró una pregunta al oído. Louisa susurró la única y triste palabra de respuesta.

- ¿Te ha abandonado? -preguntó Magdalen, después de esperar un rato, pensativa.

- No.

- ¿Le amas?

- Con todo mi corazón.

El recuerdo de su matrimonio sin amor hirió a Magdalen en lo más vivo.

- ¡Por amor de Dios, no te arrodilles ante mí! -exclamó, irritada-. ¡Si hay una mujer envilecida en esta habitación soy yo y no tú!

Alzó a la muchacha por la fuerza y volvió a sentarla en la silla. Ambas aguardaron un rato en silencio. Magdalen se sentó de nuevo con la mano aún sobre el hombro de Louisa y contempló con indescriptible amargura el fuego mortecino. «¡Oh! -pensó-. ¡Qué mujeres tan felices hay en el mundo! ¡Mujeres que aman a sus maridos! ¡Madres que no se avergüenzan de sus hijos!»

- ¿Estás más tranquila? -preguntó, dirigiéndose afablemente a Louisa una vez más-. ¿Podrás responderme si te pregunto una cosa? ¿Dónde está el bebé?

- Con un ama de cría.

- ¿Te ayuda el padre a mantenerlo?

- Hace todo lo que puede, señora.

- ¿Qué es? ¿Trabaja en el servicio doméstico? ¿Tiene un oficio?

- Trabaja en el taller de su padre, que es maestro carpintero.

- Si tiene trabajo, ¿por qué no se ha casado contigo?

- La culpa es de su padre, señora, no suya. Su padre no se apiada de nosotros. Le echaría de su casa y del trabajo si se casara conmigo.

- ¿No podría encontrar trabajo en otro sitio?

- Es difícil encontrar trabajo en Londres, señora. Hay tantísima gente en la ciudad que se quitan el pan de la boca los unos a los otros. Si tuviéramos dinero para emigrar, hace tiempo que se hubiera casado conmigo.

- ¿Se casaría contigo si tuvieras el dinero ahora?

- Estoy segura de que sí, señora. En Australia hay mucho trabajo y ganaría el doble o el triple que aquí. Se esfuerza mucho por ahorrar todo lo que puede para irnos y yo guardo lo poco que me queda después de atender a las necesidades de mi bebé. ¡Pero es tan poco! Aunque vivamos muchos años, no hay esperanza para nosotros. Sé que he obrado mal en todos los aspectos y sé que no merezco ser feliz. Pero ¿cómo podía dejar que mi bebé sufriera? Me vi obligada a entrar a servir. Mi señora fue muy severa conmigo y me estropeé la salud intentando ganarme la vida cosiendo. Jamás hubiera engañado a nadie con unas referencias falsas de haber tenido alternativa. Estaba sola y desamparada, señora, y sólo puedo pedirle que me perdone.

- Pídeselo a mujeres mejores que yo -dijo Magdalen con tristeza-. Yo sólo soy buena para compadecerte, y te compadezco de todo corazón. Yo en tu lugar también habría utilizado referencias falsas. No hablemos más del pasado, no imaginas cómo me hieres al hablar de él. Hablemos del futuro. Creo que puedo ayudarte sin causarte ningún perjuicio. Creo que a cambio tú puedes ayudarme y hacerme el mayor de los favores. Espera y sabrás lo que quiero decir. Supón que te casaras; ¿cuánto os costaría emigrar a tu marido y a ti?

Louisa mencionó el precio de un pasaje de tercera clase para un hombre y su mujer. Hablaba en tono bajo y desesperanzado. Pese a lo moderado de la suma, a sus ojos era una riqueza inalcanzable.

Magdalen dio un respingo de sorpresa y volvió a coger la mano de la muchacha.

- ¡Louisa! -dijo con gran seriedad-. Si yo te diera el dinero, ¿qué harías tú por mí a cambio?

La proposición pareció dejar a Louisa muda de asombro. Tembló violentamente y no respondió. Magdalen repitió la pregunta.

- Oh, señora, ¿lo dice en serio? -dijo la muchacha-. ¿Lo dice en serio?

- Sí -contestó Magdalen-. Lo digo muy en serio. ¿Qué harías por mí a cambio?

- ¿Hacer? -dijo Louisa-. ¡Oh, qué no haría más bien! -Intentó besar la mano de su señora, pero Magdalen no lo consintió. Retiró el bajo de su vestido con firmeza, casi con brusquedad.

- No tienes nada que agradecerme -dijo-. Nos ayudamos la una a la otra, eso es todo. Siéntate tranquilamente y déjame pensar.

Durante los diez minutos siguientes reinó el silencio en la habitación. Al final de ese intervalo, Magdalen sacó su reloj y lo acercó al hogar. El fuego daba apenas la luz suficiente para ver la hora. Eran cerca de las seis.

- ¿Te has serenado lo bastante para bajar y transmitir un mensaje? -preguntó al tiempo que se levantaba de la silla-. Es un mensaje muy sencillo; sólo tienes que decirle al mozo que quiero un coche de punto en cuanto me consiga uno. Debo salir inmediatamente. Sabrás el porqué más tarde. Tengo aún muchas cosas que decirte, pero no dispongo de tiempo ahora. Cuando me vaya, tráete tu labor aquí y espera a que regrese. Volveré antes de la hora de acostarse.

Sin más explicaciones, encendió una vela apresuradamente y se retiró al dormitorio para ponerse el chal y el sombrero.

CAPÍTULO II

Entre las nueve y las diez de esa noche, Louisa, que aguardaba con impaciencia, oyó la tan esperada llamada a la puerta principal de la casa. Corrió escaleras abajo de inmediato y abrió la puerta a su señora.

Magdalen tenía el rostro encendido y mostraba mucha más agitación al regresar a la casa que cuando la había abandonado.

- Siéntate otra vez -ordenó a Louisa con impaciencia-, pero deja a un lado la labor. Quiero que escuches con mucha atención lo que voy a decirte.

.Louisa obedeció. Magdalen se sentó en el lado opuesto de la mesa y movió las bujías para ver con mayor claridad y sin interrupción el rostro de su sirvienta.

- ¿Te has fijado en una respetable mujer mayor -empezó bruscamente- que ha venido a visitarme una o dos veces durante la última quincena?

- Sí, señora. Creo que le abrí yo la puerta la segunda vez que vino. ¿Una señora mayor de nombre señora Attwood?

- Ésa misma. La señora Attwood es el ama de llaves del señor Loscombe, pero no en su residencia privada, sino en sus oficinas de Lincoln's Inn. Le había prometido ir a tomar el té con ella alguna tarde de esta semana, y he ido hoy. ¿Verdad que resulta extraño que tenga esta familiaridad con una mujer en la posición de la señora Attwood?

Louisa no contestó con palabras. Su rostro habló por ella; difícilmente podía dejar de extrañarle.

- Tenía un motivo para hacerme amiga de la señora Attwood -prosiguió Magdalen-. Es una viuda con una numerosa familia compuesta por varias hijas. Todas ellas trabajan en el servicio doméstico. Una de ellas es segunda criada al servicio del almirante Bartram en St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. Me lo dijo el amo de la señora Attwood, y tan pronto como lo descubrí, resolví secretamente trabar relación con ella. Más extraño aún, ¿no?

Louisa empezaba a intranquilizarse. Las maneras de su ama contradecían sus palabras, sugerían claramente que se avecinaba algo alarmante.

- No sabría decir -continuó Magdalen- qué atractivo encuentra la señora Attwood en relacionarse conmigo. Sólo puedo decirte que ha conocido tiempos mejores; es una persona educada y puede que disfrute de mi compañía por esa razón. En cualquier caso, ha aceptado de buena gana mi acercamiento. El atractivo que encuentro yo, por mi parte, en esa buena mujer es fácil de explicar. Siento una gran curiosidad (inexplicable curiosidad, pensarás tú) por la situación del servicio en St. Crux-in-the-Marsh. La hija de la señora Attwood es una buena chica que escribe a su madre a cada momento. La madre está orgullosa de las cartas y de su hija, y está más que dispuesta a hablar de ella y de su colocación. Ése es el atractivo que la señora Attwood tiene para mí. ¿Lo comprendes hasta aquí?

Sí, Louisa lo comprendía. Magdalen prosiguió.

- Gracias a la señora Attwood y a su hija -dijo-, conozco ya ciertos detalles curiosos sobre el servicio de St. Crux. Las lenguas y las cartas de los criados se ocupan de sus señores más a menudo de lo que éstos piensan. No hay señora en St. Crux más que el ama de llaves, pero hay un amo, el almirante Bartram. Al parecer es un anciano cuyos caprichos y manías divierten a allegados y criados por igual. Una de sus manías (la única que debemos molestarnos en considerar) es que tuvo ya bastantes hombres alrededor de él cuando vivía en el mar, y ahora que vive en tierra, sólo quiere que le sirvan criadas. El único hombre en la casa es un viejo lobo de mar que ha estado toda su vida con el almirante; es una especie de pensionista en St. Crux y tiene poco o nada que

ver con el trabajo de la casa. Todos los sirvientes de la casa son mujeres, y en lugar de un lacayo que le sirva las comidas, el almirante tiene una doncella. La doncella que hay ahora en St. Crux está prometida para casarse y se irá tan pronto como su amo pueda prescindir de ella. Hace algunos días que descubrí todo esto. Pero cuando la he visto esta noche, la señora Attwood había recibido otra carta de su hija, y esa carta me ha ayudado a descubrir algo más. El ama de llaves no sabe qué hacer para encontrar una nueva doncella. Su amo insiste en que ha de ser joven y de buen ver; el resto se lo deja al ama de llaves, pero en eso es inflexible. Todas las indagaciones llevadas a cabo en los contornos han sido inútiles para hallar el tipo de doncella que quiere el almirante. Si no se consigue nada en las próximas dos o tres semanas, el ama de llaves insertará un anuncio en The Times y vendrá a Londres en persona para ver a las aspirantes y llevar a cabo rigurosas indagaciones personales sobre sus referencias.

Louisa miró a su señora con más atención que nunca. La expresión de perplejidad abandonó su rostro y una sombra de decepción apareció en su lugar.

- Recuerda lo que te he dicho -prosiguió Magdalen- y aguarda un poco más mientras te hago unas preguntas. No creas que me has entendido todavía. Te aseguro que no es así. ¿Has servido siempre como doncella personal?

- No, señora.

- ¿Has servido alguna vez como camarera?

- Sólo en una casa, señora, y por poco tiempo.

- Supongo que el suficiente para aprender tus deberes.

- Sí, señora.

- ¿Cuáles eran tus deberes, además de servir las comidas?

- Tenía que hacer pasar a las visitas.

- Sí, ¿y qué más?

- Tenía que ocuparme de la plata y la cristalería, y también de las mantelerías. Tenía que acudir cuando sonaran todas las campanillas menos las de los dormitorios. Había alguna que otra tarea suelta a veces...

- ¿Pero tus deberes habituales eran los que acabas de mencionar?

- Sí, señora.

- ¿Cuánto tiempo hace que serviste como doncella?

- Un poco más de dos años, señora.

- Supongo que no habrás olvidado cómo servir la comida, limpiar la plata y todo lo demás en ese tiempo.

Al oír esta pregunta, la atención de Louisa, que se había apartado más y más de las preguntas que le hacía Magdalen, acabó desviándose del todo. Su creciente inquietud venció a su discreción e incluso a su timidez. En lugar de responder a su señora, confusa, aventuró de repente una pregunta.

- Discúlpeme, señora -dijo-. ¿Quiere usted que me presente a la vacante de doncella en St. Crux?

- ¿Tú? -replicó Magdalen-. ¡Por supuesto que no! ¿Has olvidado lo que te he dicho en esta misma habitación antes de salir? Quiero que te cases y que te vayas a Australia con tu marido y tu hijo. No has esperado a que te lo explicara, como yo te he pedido. Has sacado tus propias conclusiones, pero son erróneas. Ahora mismo te he hecho una pregunta que no has contestado; te preguntaba si habías olvidado tus deberes como

doncella.

- ¡Oh no, señora! -Louisa había contestado de mala gana hasta entonces. Su última respuesta fue pronta y confiada.

- ¿Podrías enseñárselos a otra sirvienta? -preguntó Magdalen.

- Sí, señora, fácilmente si fuera lista y prestara atención.

- ¿Podrías enseñármelos a mí?

Louisa dio un respingo con el rostro demudado.

- ¡Usted, señora! -exclamó en parte con incredulidad, en parte alarmada.

- Sí -dijo Magdalen-. ¿Podrías capacitarme para ocupar la vacante de doncella en St. Crux?

A pesar de la sencillez de estas palabras, la perplejidad que produjeron en Louisa parecieron impedirle comprender la propuesta de su señora.

- ¡Usted, señora! -repitió con expresión alelada.

- Quizá te ayude a comprender este extraordinario proyecto mío -dijo Magdalen- si te digo claramente cuál es su objetivo. ¿Recuerdas lo que te dije sobre el testamento del señor Vanstone cuando llegaste aquí desde Escocia para reunirte conmigo?

- Sí, señora. Me dijo usted que la había dejado completamente fuera del testamento. Estoy segura de que mi compañera no habría sido jamás uno de los testigos si hubiera sabido…

- Eso ya no importa. No culpo a tu compañera, no culpo a nadie más que a la señora Lecount. Déjame seguir con lo que te estaba explicando. No es completamente seguro que la señora Lecount pueda hacerme el daño que ella pretendía. Existe una posibilidad de que mi abogado, el señor Loscombe, pueda conseguirme lo que me pertenece por derecho, pese al testamento. La posibilidad depende de que encuentre una carta que obra secretamente en poder del almirante Bartram. Es lo que cree el abogado y yo también lo creo. No tengo la menor esperanza de llegar a esa carta si lo intento con mi auténtica identidad. La señora Lecount ha envenenado el ánimo del almirante Bartram en contra de mí y el señor Vanstone le confió un secreto sobre mí. Si le escribiera, no respondería a mi carta. Si me presentara en su casa, me cerrarían la puerta en las narices. He de hallar el modo de penetrar en St. Crux con una personalidad desconocida, he de hallarme en situación de poder husmear por toda la casa sin levantar sospechas, he de estar en ella con tiempo de sobra para buscar. Todas las circunstancias están a mi favor si entro en la casa como sirvienta, y como sirvienta pienso ir.

- Pero usted es una dama, señora -objetó Louisa con gran perplejidad-. Las criadas de St. Crux la descubrirían.

- No me asusta en lo más mínimo que puedan descubrirme -dijo Magdalen-. Sé disfrazarme para caracterizarme de otras personas con mayor destreza de la que me supones. Deja que yo afronte las posibilidades de ser descubierta; es un riesgo que debo correr. Pero no hablemos ahora más que de lo que te concierne a ti. No decidas todavía si me darás o no la ayuda que necesito. Primero espera a oír de qué se trata. Eres rápida y diestra con la aguja. ¿Podrías hacerme el vestido adecuado para una sirvienta y retocar uno de mis mejores vestidos de seda para que te valga a ti en una semana?

- Creo que podría tenerlos hechos en una semana, señora, pero ¿por qué he de llevar yo…?

- Espera un poco y lo sabrás. Mañana le daré la semana de aviso a la patrona. En ese intervalo, mientras tú haces los vestidos, yo puedo aprender los deberes de una

doncella. Cuando la criada de aquí nos traiga la cena y tú y yo estemos solas en la habitación, en lugar de ser tú quien me sirva como de costumbre, seré yo quien te sirva a ti. (Hablo en serio, ¡no me interrumpas!) Lo que pueda aprender de más sin estorbarte, lo practicaré cuidadosamente a la menor oportunidad. Cuando termine la semana y los vestidos estén listos, abandonaremos este lugar y buscaremos otro alojamiento, tú como señora, yo como tu doncella.

- Me descubrirían, señora -la interrumpió Louisa, temblando ante la perspectiva que tenía ante ella-. Yo no soy una dama.

- Pero yo sí -dijo Magdalen con amargura-. ¿Quieres que te diga lo que es una dama? Una dama es una mujer que lleva un vestido de seda y se da importancia. Yo te pondré el vestido de seda en el cuerpo y la importancia en la cabeza. Hablas bien, eres una persona tranquila y con dominio de sí misma por naturaleza. Sólo con que venzas tu timidez, no temeré lo más mínimo por ti. Tendremos tiempo de sobra en nuestro nuevo alojamiento para que tú practiques tu papel y yo el mío. Habrá tiempo de sobra para hacer unos cuantos vestidos más, otro vestido para mí y tu vestido de novia (que pienso regalarte). Haré que me traigan el periódico cada día. Cuando aparezca el anuncio lo contestaré, con cualquier nombre que se me ocurra en ese momento, con el tuyo, si quieres prestármelo, y cuando el ama de llaves me pregunte por mis referencias, la remitiré a ti. Ella te verá a ti en la posición de una señora y a mí en la de una doncella. Es imposible que conciba sospechas, a menos que se las crees tú. Si tienes el valor necesario para seguir mis instrucciones y decir lo que yo te indicaré que digas, la entrevista se habrá acabado en diez minutos.

- Me asusta usted, señora -dijo Louisa temblando aún-. Me ha dejado sin respiración por la sorpresa. ¡Valor! ¿De dónde sacaré yo el valor?

- Donde yo lo guardo para ti -dijo Magdalen-. En el dinero del pasaje para Australia. Contempla la nueva perspectiva que te proporciona un marido y te devuelve a tu hijo; ahí encontrarás el valor.

El rostro triste de Louisa se iluminó, su débil corazón latió con fuerza. Una chispa del temple de su señora voló hasta sus ojos cuando imaginó aquel dorado futuro.

- Si aceptas mi propuesta -prosiguió Magdalen-, pueden publicar las amonestaciones inmediatamente si quieres. Te prometo darte el dinero el día en que aparezca el anuncio en el periódico. El riesgo de que el ama de llaves me rechace es enteramente mío. Sé que mi belleza se ha marchitado lamentablemente, pero creo que aún puedo salir ganando frente a las demás criadas; creo que aún puedo parecer la doncella que quiere el almirante Bartram. Tú no tienes nada que temer en este asunto; yo no te lo pediría en caso contrario. El único peligro existente es que me descubran en St. Crux y ése recae únicamente sobre mí. Cuando yo entre en la casa del almirante Bartram, tú estarás casada y el barco te llevará a una nueva vida.

El semblante de Louisa, ora animado por la esperanza, ora ensombrecido de nuevo por el temor, mostraba las huellas visibles de la lucha en la que se debatía para tomar una decisión. Intentó ganar tiempo, intentó pronunciar unas confusas palabras de agradecimiento, pero su señora la hizo callar.

- No tienes por qué darme las gracias -dijo Magdalen-. Te lo repito, no hacemos más que ayudarnos mutuamente. Tengo muy poco dinero, pero basta para lograr lo que deseas y te lo entrego libremente. He llevado una vida miserable, he hecho que otros se sintieran desgraciados por mi causa. Ni siquiera puedo hacerte feliz a ti si no es tentándote con un nuevo engaño. ¡Bueno, bueno! No es culpa tuya. Mujeres peores que tú me ayudarán si tú te niegas. La decisión es tuya, pero no tengas miedo de coger el dinero. Si tengo éxito, no lo necesitaré. Si fracaso…

Magdalen se interrumpió, bruscamente se levantó de la silla y ocultó el rostro a Louisa alejándose hacia la chimenea.

- Si fracaso -prosiguió, reanudando la frase y calentándose el pie despreocupadamente

en la pantalla de la chimenea-, todo el dinero del mundo sería inútil para mí. Olvídate del porqué, olvídate de mí, piensa en ti misma. No me aprovecharé de la confesión que me has hecho, no influiré en ti en contra de tu voluntad. Haz lo que creas mejor. Pero recuerda una cosa: estoy decidida, nada de lo que hagas o digas me hará cambiar de opinión.

El súbito alejamiento de Magdalen de la mesa, el tono alterado de su voz al pronunciar las últimas palabras parecieron renovar las dudas de Louisa. Juntó las manos sobre el regazo retorciéndoselas con fuerza.

- Esto ha sido demasiado repentino para mí, señora -dijo la muchacha-. Me siento muy tentada de decir que sí. Sin embargo, casi me da miedo…

- Consúltalo con la almohada -dijo Magdalen, interrumpiéndola y manteniendo el rostro vuelto hacia el fuego-, y dime qué has decidido cuando entres en mi habitación mañana por la mañana. Esta noche no necesitaré ayuda. Yo misma puedo desvestirme. Tú no eres tan fuerte como yo. Creo que estás cansada. No te quedes levantada por mí. ¡Buenas noches, Louisa, y felices sueños!

Bajó la voz paulatinamente al pronunciar estas palabras afables. Dejó escapar un hondo suspiro y, apoyando el brazo sobre la repisa de la chimenea, reposó en él la cabeza con un cansancio desesperado y lastimoso de ver. Louisa no había abandonado la habitación como suponía Magdalen. Louisa se acercó en silencio a su señora y le besó la mano. Magdalen se sobresaltó, pero esta vez no intentó apartar la mano. La conciencia de su terrible soledad la aplacó al notar el roce de los labios de su doncella. Su orgulloso corazón se ablandó, sus ojos se llenaron de lágrimas ardientes.

- ¡No me aflijas! -dijo débilmente-. El momento de la bondad ha pasado ya; ahora sólo consigue agobiarme. ¡Buenas noches!

Cuando llegó la mañana, Magdalen recibió la respuesta afirmativa con la que contaba.

Ese día, la patrona recibió el aviso de que dejaban las habitaciones a una semana vista y la aguja de Louisa volaba entre las costuras del vestido de doncella.

FIN DE LA SEXTA ESCENA

ENTREACTO

DESARROLLO DE LA HISTORIA A TRAVÉS DEL CORREO

I

DE LA SEÑORITA GARTH AL SEÑOR PENDRIL

Westmoreland House, 3 de enero de 1848

Querido señor Pendril:

Le escribo, tal como me pidió, para hacerle saber qué tal está Norah y para hablarle de la mejoría que he notado en su ánimo con respecto al asunto de su hermana.

No puedo afirmar que se haya resignado al prolongado silencio de Magdalen, conozco demasiado bien su naturaleza leal para pensar tal cosa. Sólo puedo decirle que ha empezado a hallar alivio de la pesada carga de dolor e incertidumbre en nuevos pensamientos y nuevas esperanzas. Dudo de que ella se haya dado cuenta, pero yo veo el resultado, aunque ella no sea consciente. Veo su corazón abriéndose al consuelo de otro amor. Norah no me ha comentado una sola palabra al respecto, ni yo a ella, pero tan cierto como que sé que últimamente las visitas del señor George Bartram a la familia de Portland Place son cada vez más frecuentes, puedo asegurarle igualmente que, a pesar de su zozobra, Norah ha hallado un consuelo que no es obra mía y una esperanza en el futuro que yo no le he enseñado a sentir.

Huelga decir que le cuento todo esto en la más estricta confidencialidad. Sólo Dios sabe si la feliz expectativa, que en mi opinión es ahora incipiente, crecerá o no a medida que pase el tiempo. Cuanto más conozco al señor George Bartram -y me ha visitado en más de una ocasión- más crece en mi estima. En mi humilde opinión, es un caballero en el sentido más elevado y auténtico de la palabra. Si pudiera vivir para ver a Norah convertida en su esposa, moriría tranquila. Pero ¿quién puede adivinar el futuro? Hemos sufrido tanto que me da miedo esperar demasiado.

¿Sabe usted algo de Magdalen? No sé ni cómo ni por qué, pero desde que me enteré de la muerte de su marido, el antiguo cariño que sentía por ella parece aferrarse a mí con mayor obstinación que nunca.

Le saluda atentamente,

HARRIET GARTH

II

DEL SEÑOR PENDRIL A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

Serle Street, 4 de enero de 1848

Querida señorita Garth:

De la persona de la señora de Noel Vanstone no tengo noticia alguna. Pero ha llegado a mi conocimiento, desde la última vez que nos vimos usted y yo, que el informe sobre la situación en que la ha dejado la muerte de su marido es absolutamente cierto. No ha recibido legado de ningún tipo. Su nombre no se menciona siquiera en el testamento de su marido.

Sabiendo lo que sabemos, no podemos ocultar el hecho de que esa circunstancia nos amenaza con ser la causa de más bochorno y tal vez de más aflicción. La señora de Noel Vanstone no es una mujer que se someta sin ofrecer una resistencia desesperada al desbaratamiento total de sus intrigas y esperanzas. El mero hecho de no saber nada de ella desde la muerte de su marido me sugiere que hemos de esperar nuevas maldades. En su situación y con su temperamento, cuanto más tranquila parezca ahora, más empedernida será mi desconfianza hacia ella. Es impasible adivinar a qué violentas medidas podría llevarle su extrema situación actual. Es imposible estar seguros de que no dará motivos para un escándalo público que también afecte esta vez a su inocente hermana.

Sé que no interpretará usted erróneamente el motivo que me ha inducido a escribir estas líneas. Sé que no me creerá tan desconsiderado como para causarle una alarma innecesaria. Mi sincera impaciencia por ver realizada esa feliz expectativa a la que alude en su carta me ha animado a escribir con menos reserva de lo que hubiera sido normal. La exhorto a que haga uso de su influencia en toda ocasión en que pueda ejercerla justamente para fortalecer ese cariño creciente, alejándolo para siempre de cualquier desastre venidero, mientras pueda hacerlo. Cuando le diga que la fortuna de la que se ha privado a la señora de Noel Vanstone ha sido heredada por el almirante Bartram en su totalidad y cuando añada que se da por sabido que el señor George Bartram es el heredero de su tío, creo que admitirá usted que no la he aconsejado en balde.

Le saluda atentamente,

WILLIAM PENDRIL

III

DEL ALMIRANTE BARTRAM A LA SEÑORA DRAKE

(AMA DE LLAVES EN ST. CRUX)

St. Crux, 10 de enero de 1848

Señora Drake:

He recibido su carta de Londres en la que me informa de que al fin me ha encontrado una nueva camarera y de que la chica está dispuesta a regresar con usted a St. Crux cuando los demás encargos que ha de realizar usted le permitan volver.

Este acuerdo debe modificarse de inmediato, por un razón que lamento sinceramente tener que dar.

La enfermedad de mi sobrina, la señora Girdlestone -que parecía tan leve que nadie se alarmó, ni siquiera los médicos-, ha tenido un fatal desenlace. He recibido esta mañana la sorprendente noticia de su muerte. Al parecer su marido está loco de dolor. El señor George se ha ido ya a casa de su cuñado para supervisar los últimos y tristes deberes, y yo debo seguirle antes de que se celebre el funeral. Tenemos intención de llevarnos luego al señor Girdlestone y probar el efecto de un cambio de lugar y de paisajes. En estas tristes circunstancias, puede que esté ausente un mes o seis semanas como mínimo de St. Crux. La casa se cerrará y no se precisará a la nueva sirvienta hasta mi regreso.

Le dirá usted por tanto a la chica, al recibir esta carta, que una muerte en la familia ha causado un cambio temporal en nuestro acuerdo. Si está dispuesta a esperar, puede usted comprometerse con ella para dentro de seis semanas. Para entonces ya habré vuelto, aunque el señor George no lo haga. Si se niega, páguele una compensación justa y olvídela.

Atentamente,

IV

DE LA SEÑORA DRAKE AL ALMIRANTE BARTRAM

11 de enero

Honorable señor:

Espero haber realizado todos mis encargos y volver a St. Crux mañana, pero le escribo para evitarle preocupaciones en caso de demora.

La joven que he tomado a su servicio (de nombre Louisa) está dispuesta a esperar, y su actual señora, que está interesada en su bienestar, atenderá a sus necesidades durante el intervalo. La joven está informada de que entrará a servir en su nueva casa dentro de seis semanas a partir de hoy, es decir, el próximo veinticinco de febrero.

Le ruego que acepte mis respetuosas condolencias por la dolorosa pérdida que ha sufrido la familia.

Su humilde servidora,

SOPHIA DRAKE

LA SÉPTIMA ESCENA

St. Crux-in-the-Marsh

CAPÍTULO I

- Aquí es donde dormirás. Arréglate y baja luego otra vez a mi habitación. El almirante ha regresado y tendrás que empezar por servirle la cena de hoy.

Con estas palabras, la señora Drake, el ama de llaves, cerró la puerta, y la nueva camarera se quedó sola en su dormitorio de St. Crux.

El día era el memorable veinticinco de febrero. Apenas cuatro meses después de que la señora Lecount pusiera las instrucciones confidenciales del señor Noel Vanstone en manos de su albacea, ya se había dado la combinación de circunstancias que ella había procurado evitar desde el principio. La viuda del señor Noel Vanstone y el fideicomiso secreto del almirante Bartram se hallaban bajo el mismo techo.

Hasta entonces, los acontecimientos se habían desarrollado favorablemente para Magdalen sin excepción. Hasta entonces, ningún obstáculo se había interpuesto en su camino hacia St. Crux. Hacía tres días que Louisa -de quien había tomado prestado el nombre- había zarpado rumbo a Australia con su marido y su hijo; ella era la única a la que había confiado su secreto, pero ahora se hallaba fuera de Inglaterra. La muchacha se había mostrado cuidadosa, leal y digna de confianza hasta el último momento. Había pasado la dura prueba de la entrevista con el ama de llaves y no había olvidado las instrucciones con que Magdalen la había preparado a tal fin. Ella misma había propuesto que sacaran provecho de la demora de seis semanas causada por la muerte en la familia del almirante continuando con la práctica de las importantísimas lecciones domésticas, de cuya perfecta adquisición dependía el éxito de la audaz estratagema de su señora. Gracias al plazo así obtenido, cuando Louisa se casó y llegó el día de la despedida, Magdalen había aprendido y dominaba hasta el último detalle todo cuanto la antigua doncella podía enseñarle. El día en que cruzó los umbrales de St. Crux para emprender su peligrosa aventura, lo hizo con la fuerza de la presencia de ánimo ante las situaciones extremas que le había enseñado su reciente experiencia, con la fuerza aún mayor de sus entrenadas facultades para la asunción de identidades ajenas, y con la fuerza que las superaba a todas: dos meses de familiarización diaria con los deberes del empleo que se había comprometido a desempeñar.

Tan pronto como la señora Drake la dejó sola, Magdalen deshizo su equipaje y se vistió.

Se puso un uniforme de paño de color lavanda -el almirante Bartram había ordenado que todos los sirvientes vistieran de medio luto por la señora Girdlestone-, un delantal blanco de muselina, cofia y cuello de blanca pulcritud con cintas a juego con el vestido. Aquel uniforme de sirvienta, aquel sencillo vestido cerrado hasta el cuello, y la bonita cofia blanca en la cabeza, el vestido más modesto y el más atrayente a un tiempo que pueda llevar una mujer a los ojos de cualquier hombre, excepto un lencero, casi consiguieron borrar los tristes vestigios que el sufrimiento mental había producido en su belleza. Ataviada con el vestido de noche de una dama, escotado, y con la figura armada, más que vestida, de inflexible seda, el almirante hubiera pasado junto a Magdalen en su propio salón sin fijarse en ella. Vestida con el uniforme de tarde de una sirvienta, ningún admirador de la belleza podía verla y no volver la cabeza para mirarla una segunda vez.

Cuando bajó las escaleras de camino al dormitorio del ama de llaves, pasó junto a las entradas de dos largos corredores de piedra, uno situado en el segundo piso y el otro en el primero, en los que se abrían sendas hileras de puertas. «¡Muchas habitaciones! -pensó al mirar las puertas-. ¡Será un trabajo agotador buscar aquí lo que he venido a encontrar!»

Al llegar a la planta baja tropezó con un viejo de rostro curtido que se detuvo y la miró fijamente manifestando un gran interés. Era el mismo viejo que el capitán Wragge había visto en el jardín de atrás de St. Crux tallando un barco a escala. Lo conocían todos en los alrededores como «el timonel del almirante». Se llamaba Mazey. Sesenta años habían grabado en el rostro severo y arrugado del veterano la huella de la dura vida del mar y las borracheras en tierra. Sesenta años habían demostrado su fidelidad y, al final del viaje, habían hecho arribar a puerto su viejo y estropeado armazón dejándolo en la casa de su patrón.

No habiendo nadie más cerca a quien pudiera preguntar, Magdalen pidió al viejo que le mostrara el camino de la habitación del ama de llaves.

- Yo te lo mostraré, querida -dijo el viejo Mazey con la voz cavernosa y el tono chillón característicos de los sordos-. Tú eres la nueva camarera, ¿eh? ¡Y buena moza también! A su señoría, el almirante, le gustan las camareras con buen recorrido a proa y a popa. Tú servirás, querida, tu servirás.

- No debes prestar atención a lo que te diga el viejo Mazey -observó el ama de llaves, que abrió su puerta cuando el viejo lobo de mar expresaba su aprobación con aquellas palabras-. Tiene el privilegio de hablar como le plazca, y es pesado y desaliñado, pero no tiene mala intención.

Tras disculpar de esta forma al veterano, la señora Drake condujo a Magdalen primero a la despensa y luego al cuarto de la ropa blanca para instalarla con la debida formalidad en sus dominios domésticos. Una vez completada esta ceremonia, llevó arriba a la nueva camarera y le mostró el comedor, que se abría al corredor del primer piso. Allí le dio instrucciones de que pusiera el mantel y servicio para una sola persona, puesto que el señor George Bartram no había vuelto a St. Crux con su tío. Los ojos penetrantes de la señora Drake observaron a Magdalen atentamente mientras realizaba aquella tarea introductoria, y una vez puesta la mesa, la señora Drake pudo comprobar personalmente que, por el momento, la nueva sirvienta demostraba conocer su trabajo a la perfección.

Una hora más tarde, la sopera estaba sobre la mesa y Magdalen se hallaba sola, de pie detrás de la silla vacía del almirante, aguardando la primera revista de su amo cuando entrara en el comedor.

Un fuerte campanillazo sonó en la planta baja; unos pasos rápidos resonaron en el corredor de piedra; la puerta se abrió de pronto y entró en la habitación un anciano alto, enjuto y de piel amarilla, sagaz en la mirada, hábil en la réplica y agitado en las maneras; llevaba dos grandes perros labradores pisándole los talones, y ocupó su asiento con violenta precipitación. Los perros le siguieron y se instalaron con la mayor solemnidad a ambos lados de su silla. Aquél era el almirante Bartram y aquéllos sus compañeros en la solitaria comida.

- ¡Ay!, ¡ay!, ¡ay! ¡Aquí tenemos a la nueva camarera, por supuesto! -empezó, mirando a Magdalen con sus ojos penetrantes pero amables-. ¿Cómo te llamas, buena muchacha? ¿Louisa, dices? Te llamaré Lucy, si no te importa. Quita la tapa, querida. Hoy he llegado un par de minutos tarde. No dejes de ser puntual mañana por ese motivo. Suelo ser tan puntual como un reloj. ¿Qué tal estás después del viaje? ¿Has dado muchos botes en mi carro de ballestas desde la estación? Excelente la sopa; quema como un demonio; me recuerda a la que tomábamos en las Antillas en el año tres. ¿Llevas puesto el medio luto? Ven aquí y déjame ver. Ah, sí, muy limpio, y bonito, y pulcro. ¡Pobre señora Girdlestone! ¡Oh, la pobre y queridísima señora Girdlestone! No tendrás miedo de los perros, Lucy, ¿eh? ¿Cómo? ¿Te gustan los perros? ¡Eso está bien! Sé siempre amable con los animales. Estos dos perros cenan conmigo todos los días, excepto cuando recibo

invitados. El perro del hocico negro es *Brutus* y el del hocico blanco es *Cassius*. ¿Has oído hablar alguna vez de Brutus y Cassius? ¿Romanos antiguos? Eso es; buena chica. Cuida bien el libro y la aguja y uno de estos días te encontraremos un buen marido. ¡Llévate la sopa, querida, llévate la sopa!

¡Aquél era el hombre cuyo secreto se había convertido en objetivo único en la vida de Magdalen! ¡Aquél era el hombre cuyo nombre había suplantado al suyo en el testamento de Noel Vanstone!

Después de la sopa llegaron el pescado y el asado, y el almirante siguió con sus divagaciones -ora en soliloquio, ora dirigiéndose a la camarera, ora hablando a los perros- siempre con la misma familiaridad y la misma falta de ilación. Magdalen observó con cierta sorpresa que los compañeros de cena del almirante no habían recibido hasta entonces las migas del plato de su amo. Las dos magníficas bestias estaban sentadas sobre los cuartos traseros con las cabezotas apoyadas sobre la mesa, contemplando cómo se desarrollaba la comida con suma atención, sin que al parecer esperaran compartirla. Magdalen se llevó el asado, cambió el plato del almirante, quitó las tapaderas de plata de las dos cazuelas que estaban a ambos lados de la mesa. Cuando ofreció el primero de los sabrosos estofados a su amo, los perros mostraron un súbito y jadeante interés. A *Brutus* la glotonería se le hacía agua en la boca, y la lengua de *Cassius* sobresalía con indescriptible expectación entre sus enormes mandíbulas.

El almirante se sirvió con generosidad, envió a Magdalen al aparador en busca de pan y, cuando creyó que ella no le veía, volcó furtivamente todo el contenido del plato en la boca de *Brutus*. *Cassius* lloriqueó débilmente cuando su afortunado compañero engulló el apetitoso estofado de un bocado.

- ¡Silencio, tonto! -susurró el almirante-, ¡Ahora te tocará a ti!

Magdalen ofreció el segundo estofado al almirante. Una vez más, el anciano caballero se sirvió generosamente, una vez más envió a Magdalen al aparador, y una vez más volcó todo el contenido de su plato en la boca del perro, pero eligiendo a Cassius esta vez, como convenía a un amo atento y a un hombre imparcial. Cuando llegó el siguiente plato -consistente en un sencillo pudín y una «crema» de difícil digestión- se confirmó la sospecha de Magdalen sobre la función de los perros durante la comida. Mientras el amo se comía el sencillo pudín, los perros engullían la crema de compleja elaboración. Era obvio que el almirante temía ofender a su cocinera por un lado y a su digestión por el otro, y *Brutus* y *Cassius* eran los dos cómplices bien enseñados que le ayudaban cada día a salir de aquel fenomenal aprieto.

- ¡Muy buena, muy buena! -dijo el anciano caballero con una malicia transparente-. ¡Díselo a la cocinera, querida, una crema excelente!

Tras colocar el vino y el postre sobre la mesa, Magdalen hizo ademán de retirarse. Antes de que pudiera abandonar el comedor, la llamó su amo.

- ¡Detente, detente! -dijo el almirante-. Aún no conoces las costumbres de la casa, Lucy. Sirve otro vaso de vino; aquí, a mi derecha, el más grande que encuentres, querida. Tengo un tercer amigo que viene a los postres, un viejo lobo de mar borracho que me ha seguido en mis avatares por tierra y por mar durante cincuenta años como poco. Sí, sí, ése es el vaso que necesitamos. Eres una buena chica, eres una muchacha limpia y mañosa. ¡Tranquila, querida, no hay por qué asustarse!

Un repentino porrazo al otro lado de la puerta seguido por los fuertes ladridos de los perros había sobresaltado a Magdalen.

- ¡Entre! -gritó el almirante. La puerta se abrió, *Brutus* y *Cassius* golpearon el suelo alegremente con el rabo y el viejo Mazey se acercó directamente a la derecha de la silla de su amo. El veterano se plantó allí con las piernas separadas en cuidadoso equilibrio, como si el comedor fuera un camarote y la casa un barco cabeceando sobre mar gruesa.

El almirante llenó el vaso grande de oporto, se llenó el suyo de clarete y se lo llevó a los labios.

- Dios salve a la reina, Mazey -dijo el almirante.

- Dios salve a la reina, señoría -dijo el viejo Mazey, bebiéndose el oporto como antes los perros habían engullido los estofados, de un golpe.

- ¿Qué viento tenemos, Mazey?

- Oeste y cuarta al noroeste, señoría.

- ¿Alguna novedad esta noche, Mazey?

- Sin novedad, señoría.

- Buenas noches, Mazey.

- Buenas noches, señoría.

Completada de este modo la ceremonia de sobremesa, el viejo Mazey inclinó la cabeza y volvió a salir. Brutus y Cassius se estiraron sobre la alfombra para digerir champiñones y salsas al lubrificante calor del fuego.

- Que el Señor nos haga agradecidos por los bienes recibidos -dijo el almirante-. Ve abajo, buena muchacha, y cena. Una cena ligera, Lucy, si aceptas un consejo, una cena ligera, o tendrás pesadillas. La que pronto se acuesta y pronto se levanta, querida, es una camarera sana, rica y sensata. Es la sabiduría de nuestros antepasados, no debes burlarte de ella. Buenas noches. -Con estas palabras despidió a Magdalen, y así concluyó su primer día con el almirante Bartram.

A la mañana siguiente, después del desayuno, las órdenes del almirante para la nueva camarera incluían una en particular que, en la situación de Magdalen, le interesaba recibir especialmente. En ausencia del anciano caballero, que ese día tenía unos asuntos que resolver en Ossory, Magdalen tenía instrucciones de familiarizarse con toda la parte habitada de la casa y de aprender la situación de las diversas habitaciones para saber qué campanilla les correspondía cuando se diera el caso. La señora Drake había de encargarse de supervisar la exploración de la casa, a menos que casualmente estuviera ocupada en alguna otra cosa, en cuyo caso, cualquiera de las criadas podía actuar como guía de Magdalen con igual destreza.

El almirante partió hacia Ossory al mediodía y Magdalen se presentó en la habitación de la señora Drake para iniciar el periplo por la casa. La señora Drake resultó estar ocupada en otra cosa y la remitió a la camarera principal. La susodicha sirvienta resultó hallarse aquella mañana en la misma coyuntura que la señora Drake y la remitió a las demás criadas. Las demás criadas declararon que tenían trabajo atrasado y no podían perder ni un minuto; sugirieron, sin demasiadas contemplaciones, que el viejo Mazey no tenía nada que hacer en absoluto y que conocía la casa tan bien o mejor que el abecedario. Magdalen captó la indirecta con una indignación y un desprecio que tuvo que esforzarse seriamente por ocultar. Había sospechado la noche previa (ahora estaba segura) que, incomprensiblemente, todas las criadas habían recibido su presencia con desconfianza hosca y unánime. Magdalen había visto por sí misma que la señora Drake estaba realmente ocupada esa mañana con sus cuentas, pero de todas las criadas que estaban a sus órdenes y que se habían excusado, ninguna se había molestado siquiera en fingirse más ocupada de lo habitual. Su expresión decía bien a las claras: «No nos gustas y no queremos enseñarte la casa».

Magdalen encontró al viejo Mazey, no gracias a las escasas indicaciones recibidas, sino por el sonido de la voz cascada y trémula del veterano marino, que cantaba en algún rincón apartado una estrofa de la inmortal canción marinera Tom Bowling. Justo cuando Magdalen se detenía en medio de los laberínticos corredores de piedra de la planta baja dudando del camino que debía seguir, oyó la vieja voz discordante en la distancia cantando estos versos:

His form was of the manliest beau-u-u-duty,

Faithful below Tom did his duty,

But now he's go-o-o-ne aloft!

Magdalen continuó en dirección a la voz cascada y se encontró en un pequeño cuarto que daba al jardín de atrás. Allí estaba sentado el viejo Mazey con los anteojos caídos sobre la nariz y las viejas manos nudosas trabajando torpemente en el aparejo de su barco a escala. Allí estaban *Brutus* y *Cassius*, de nuevo haciendo la digestión frente al fuego y roncando como si les encantara. En una pared se veía a lord Nelson en llameantes acuarelas, y en la otra un retrato del último buque insignia del almirante Bartram; aparecía con todo el velamen desplegado, sobre un mar de color pizarra y un cielo asalmonado para completar la ilusión.

- Cómo, no te quieren enseñar la casa, ¿eh? -dijo el viejo Mazey-. ¡Lo haré yo, entonces! La criada principal es adusta como ella sola, querida. Eres demasiado joven y bonita para gustarles, eso es lo que ocurre. -Se levantó, se quitó los anteojos y echó algo de carbón al fuego-. Es recta como un álamo -dijo el viejo Mazey, comentando la figura de Magdalen en perezoso soliloquio-. Lo digo yo, ¡y lo dice su señoría el almirante! Ven conmigo, querida -prosiguió, dirigiéndose de nuevo a Magdalen-. Primero te enseñaré los puntos cardinales. Cuando conozcas los puntos cardinales, sea arriba, sea abajo, te parecerá sencillo navegar por la casa.

Se dirigió a la puerta, se detuvo, y acordándose de repente de su barco en miniatura, volvió para guardarlo en una alacena vacía; se dirigió de nuevo a la puerta, se detuvo una vez más, recordó que hacía frío en algunas de las habitaciones y hurgó por los rincones farfullando juramentos en busca de su sombrero. Magdalen se sentó pacientemente a esperarle. Comparó con agradecimiento el trato del viejo Mazey con el que había recibido de las mujeres. Por firme que sea nuestra resistencia, por orgulloso que sea nuestro desprecio, toda crueldad deliberada -por despreciable que sea- tiene el poder de mortificarnos. Magdalen no se dio cuenta de lo mucho que le dolía la mezquina malevolencia de las criadas de la casa hasta sentir el efecto que la tosca amabilidad del viejo marino producía después en ella. La bienvenida muda de los perros, a los que habían despertado los movimientos en la habitación, la conmovieron aún más profundamente. *Brutus* metió el fuerte hocico en su mano con gesto amistoso y *Cassius* posó una amistosa pata sobre su regazo. Su corazón suspiró con ternura por las dos criaturas a las que palmeaba y acariciaba. Le parecía que era ayer mismo cuando ella y los perros de Combe-Raven paseaban juntos por el jardín y pasaban las ociosas mañanas estivales deleitándose sobre el césped sombreado.

El viejo Mazey halló por fin su sombrero e iniciaron la exploración con los perros detrás.

Dejaron atrás la planta baja, destinada exclusivamente a las dependencias de los criados, subieron al primer piso y entraron en el largo corredor que Magdalen conocía ya por su experiencia de la noche anterior.

- Pon la espalda contra esta pared -dijo el viejo Mazey señalando el largo muro, que estaba interrumpido a intervalos irregulares por ventanas que daban a un patio y a un estanque de peces y que constituía el lado derecho del corredor. Allí se colocó Magdalen-. Pon la espalda aquí -dijo el veterano- y mira hacia delante. ¿Qué ves?

- La pared opuesta del corredor -dijo Magdalen.

- ¡Ay!, ¡ay! ¿Qué más?

- Las puertas de las habitaciones.

- ¿Qué más?

- No veo nada más.

El viejo Mazey se echó a reír entre dientes, guiñó el ojo y agitó el dedo índice ante Magdalen exigiendo atención.

- Estás viendo uno de los puntos cardinales, querida. Cuando tienes la espalda contra esta pared y miras delante de ti, estás mirando al norte. Si alguna vez te pierdes por aquí, pon la espalda contra la pared, mira hacia delante y repite: «¡Estoy mirando hacia el norte!». Hazlo, sé buena chica, y te orientarás.

Después de administrar esta dosis preliminar de instrucción, el viejo Mazey abrió la primera de las puertas del lado izquierdo del corredor. Era la puerta del comedor, que Magdalen ya conocía. La segunda habitación estaba habilitada como biblioteca, y la tercera, como salita. La cuarta y quinta puertas -ambas de habitaciones desmanteladas e inhabitadas, y ambas cerradas con llave- les llevaron al extremo del ala norte de la casa y a la entrada de un segundo corredor más corto que hacía ángulo recto con el primero. Allí el viejo Mazey, que durante la inspección de las habitaciones había repartido su tiempo equitativamente entre la charla sobre «su señoría el almirante» y los silbidos a los perros, regresó con la máxima celeridad a los puntos cardinales. Con expresión grave, dio instrucciones a Magdalen de que repitiera la ceremonia de poner la espalda contra la pared. Ella intentó acortar el proceso declarando (y estaba en lo cierto) que en aquella posición sabía que miraba hacia el este.

- No hables del este, querida -dijo el viejo Mazey, impasible, insistiendo en su propio método de instrucción-, hasta que no conozcas el este. Pon la espalda contra esta pared y mira hacia delante. ¿Qué ves? -El resto del catecismo prosiguió como antes. Cuando llegaron al final, el instructor de Magdalen quedó satisfecho. Rió entre dientes y le guiñó el ojo una vez más-. Ahora puedes hablar del este, querida -dijo el veterano-, pues ahora lo conoces.

Tras avanzar apenas unos metros, el corredor del ala este terminaba en un vestíbulo con una alta puerta, que veían frente a ellos mientras avanzaban. La puerta los condujo a un salón amplio y de techo alto, decorado, como todos los demás aposentos, con un valioso y anticuado mobiliario. El guía de Magdalen la llevó al otro extremo del salón y abrió una pesada puerta corredera que se hallaba frente a la puerta de entrada.

- Ponte el delantal por encima de la cabeza -dijo el viejo Mazey-. Ahora hemos llegado al salón de banquetes. El suelo está mortalmente frío y la humedad se pega a este lugar como las cucarachas a un barco carbonero. Su señoría el almirante lo llama el Paso del Ártico. Yo también le he puesto nombre. Lo llamo Hielahuesos.

Magdalen traspasó el umbral de la puerta y se encontró en el antiguo salón de banquetes de St. Crux.

A su izquierda vio una hilera de ventanales encajados profundamente en sus alféizares, que ocupaban una fachada de más de treinta metros de longitud. A su derecha, en una larga fila que iba de un lado a otro de la pared opuesta, colgaba una lúgubre colección de cuadros viejos, ennegrecidos y con los marcos podridos, que representaban escenas de batallas en tierra y en el mar. Bajo los cuadros, a mitad de altura, se abría una chimenea cavernaria coronada por una elevada repisa de mármol negro. El único mueble (si así podía llamarse) visible en la inmensa vastedad de la estancia era un sombrío trípode antiguo de metal curiosamente cincelado; se hallaba solitario en el centro del salón y sostenía un amplio recipiente circular, lleno hasta el fondo de las cenizas de un extinto fuego de carbón. El alto techo, en otra época de finos artesonados dorados, estaba sucio y cubierto de telarañas; las paredes desnudas de los dos extremos del salón tenían manchas de humedad y el frío del suelo de mármol traspasaba la estera larga y estrecha que se había colocado, paralela a las ventanas, como senda para los viajeros a través de la habitación desértica. No podía hallarse nombre mejor que el ideado por el viejo Mazey. Hielahuesos describía con precisión el salón de banquetes de St. Crux.

- ¿No se enciende nunca el fuego en este deprimente lugar? -preguntó Magdalen.

- Depende del lado de Hielahuesos en que viva su señoría el almirante -dijo el viejo Mazey-. A su señoría le gusta cambiar de aposentos; a veces reside en un ala de la casa, a veces en la otra. Si vive al norte de Hielahuesos, que es de donde acabas de venir, no malgastamos carbón aquí. Si vive al sur de Hielahuesos, que es a donde vamos ahora,

encendemos fuego en la chimenea y carbón en el brasero. Cada noche, cuando lo hacemos, la humedad puede más que nosotros; cada mañana volvemos, y podemos más que ella.

Con este singular comentario, el viejo Mazey condujo a Magdalen al otro extremo del salón, abrió más puertas y la hizo pasar a otra serie de cuatro aposentos, todos de tamaño moderado y todos amueblados de un modo muy parecido a los del ala norte. Magdalen miró por las ventanas y vio los desatendidos jardines de St. Crux cubiertos de zarzas y de maleza. A poca distancia de donde se hallaba, la línea suavemente sinuosa de uno de aquellos arroyos de la marea peculiares de la localidad zigzagueaba apareciendo aquí y allá, resplandeciendo bajo el sol en los claros que dejaban las zarzas y los árboles. Más lejos, la vista se extendía hacia el este por la campiña salpicada de pequeñas aldeas, atravesada una y otra vez por su red de «brazos de mar», y terminaba bruscamente en la larga línea recta del rompeolas que protege la indefensa costa de Essex de la invasión del mar.

- ¿Aún tenemos más habitaciones que ver? -preguntó Magdalen, volviendo la vista atrás y mirando a un lado y a otro en busca de otra puerta.

- No hay más, querida; aquí hemos encallado, y más valdría virar y regresar a puerto -dijo el viejo Mazey-. La casa tiene otra ala, derecho hacia el sur desde donde estás tú ahora, pero se nos cae a pedazos. Tendrás que salir al jardín si quieres verla; está separada de nosotros por un mamparo de ladrillo al otro lado de esta pared. Los monjes, querida, vivían hacia el sur cientos de años antes de que su señoría el almirante naciera o pensaran en tenerlo, y bien que se lo pasaban, según tengo entendido. Se pasaban las mañanas cantando en la iglesia y las tardes bebiendo ponche en el huerto. Dormían la borrachera de ponche en los mejores lechos de plumas y engordaban gracias a sus vecinos durante todo el año. ¡Mendigos afortunados! ¡Mendigos afortunados!

Tras calificar así a los monjes, lamentando de modo evidente no haber vivido personalmente en aquellos tiempos felices, el veterano marino encabezó el camino de vuelta a través de las diferentes estancias. Al pasar de nuevo por «Hielahuesos», Magdalen lo precedió.

«Es recta como un álamo -murmuró el viejo Mazey para sí, cojeando tras su juvenil compañera y meneando la venerable cabeza para expresar su cordial aprobación-. Nunca he sido quisquilloso con la nacionalidad, pero siempre me han gustado tiesas y buenas mozas, y siempre me gustarán tiesas y buenas mozas hasta el día que me muera.»

- ¿Tenemos más habitaciones que ver en el segundo piso? -preguntó Magdalen cuando llegaron al punto de partida.

El tono de voz de Magdalen, alto y claro por naturaleza, había bastado hasta entonces al viejo marino duro de oído. Muy sorprendida, Magdalen comprobó que se volvía sordo de repente a su última pregunta.

- ¿Te sabes bien los puntos cardinales? -preguntó el viejo Mazey-. Si no estás segura, pon otra vez la espalda contra la pared y los repetiremos, empezando por el norte.

Magdalen le aseguró que conocía ya perfectamente todos los puntos cardinales, incluido el «norte», y luego repitió su pregunta en tono más alto. El veterano marino se obstinó en seguirle el juego volviéndose más sordo que nunca.

- Sí, querida -dijo-, tienes razón, hace frío en estos corredores y a menos que vuelva junto a mi fuego, se va a apagar, ¿no es cierto? Si tienes alguna duda para orientarte, ven a verme y te la aclararé. -Guiñó el ojo con expresión benevolente, llamó a los perros con un silbido y se alejó cojeando. Magdalen le oyó reír entre dientes por su éxito en eludir su curiosidad sobre el segundo piso. «¡Yo sé cómo tratarlas! -pensó el viejo Mazey sintiéndose triunfante-. Altas y bajas, nativas y extranjeras, novias y esposas: ¡yo sé cómo tratarlas a todas!»

Una vez sola, Magdalen llevó a la práctica la excelencia del método del viejo lobo de mar en beneficio propio; subió por las escaleras de inmediato para observar personalmente el segundo piso. El corredor de piedra era exactamente igual que el del primer piso, salvo en que tenía más puertas. Abrió las dos que tenía más cerca, una detrás de otra, al azar, y descubrió que ambas estancias eran dormitorios. El miedo a ser descubierta por otra de las criadas en una parte de la casa en la que nada tenía que hacer le aconsejó no llevar demasiado lejos sus indagaciones en el piso de los dormitorios. Rápidamente se dirigió al otro extremo del corredor para ver dónde terminaba; descubrió que daba a un trastero situado sobre el vestíbulo del primer piso y volvió sobre sus pasos inmediatamente.

Al volver por el corredor se fijó en un objeto que antes había escapado a su atención. Era una cama baja con ruedas colocada en paralelo con la pared y cerca de una de las puertas de los dormitorios. Pese a su extraña e incómoda situación, al parecer alguien dormía en ella: tenía sábanas puestas y la punta de un grueso gorro rojo de pescador asomaba bajo la almohada. Magdalen se aventuró a abrir la puerta cercana a la cama y se encontró con el dormitorio del almirante, según conjeturó por ciertos signos y señales. No se atrevió a arriesgar más que unos instantes de observación, volvió a cerrar la puerta con suavidad y regresó a la zona de la cocina.

La cama baja con ruedas y la extraña posición que ocupaba no abandonaron sus pensamientos en toda la tarde. ¿Quién podía dormir ahí? El recuerdo del gorro rojo de pescador y la fidelidad perruna de Mazey hacia su amo, de la que Magdalen había tenido ya suficientes pruebas, le ayudaron a adivinar que el viejo lobo de mar podía ser el ocupante de la cama. Pero ¿por qué, con dormitorios más que suficientes, había de pasar frío e incomodidad por la noche? ¿Por qué habría de dormir a la puerta de su amo para hacer guardia? ¿Existía algún peligro nocturno en la casa que el almirante temiera? La idea le pareció absurda, pero la posición de la cama le hacía pensar en ella una y otra vez.

Estimulada por su irrefrenable curiosidad, Magdalen se arriesgó a preguntar al ama de llaves. Confesó haber recorrido de un extremo al otro el corredor del segundo piso para ver si era tan largo como el del primero y mencionó haber observado con asombro la posición de la cama con ruedas. La señora Drake respondió a la pregunta de manera breve y áspera.

- No culpo a una chica joven como tú -dijo la vieja señora- por ser un poco curiosa cuando entra por vez primera en una casa tan extraña como ésta. Pero recuerda en el futuro que tu trabajo no está en el piso de los dormitorios. El señor Mazey duerme en esa cama que has visto. Tiene la costumbre de dormir a la puerta de su amo todas las noches. -Los labios de la señora Drake se cerraron tras esta parca explicación para no volver a abrirse más.

Más tarde, Magdalen halló la oportunidad de preguntar al viejo Mazey en persona. Encontró al veterano marino de muy buen humor, fumándose una pipa y calentando en su agradable fuego una jarra de hojalata llena de cerveza.

- Señor Mazey -preguntó Magdalen audazmente-, ¿por qué tiene la cama en aquel frío corredor?

- ¡Qué! Has estado arriba, mala pécora, ¿no es cierto? -dijo el viejo Mazey, mirándola maliciosamente por encima de la jarra.

Magdalen sonrió y asintió.

- ¡Vamos, vamos! -dijo con tono zalamero para engatusarle-. ¿Por qué duerme ante la puerta del almirante?

- ¿Por qué te haces la raya en el medio, querida? -preguntó el viejo Mazey con otra mirada maliciosa.

- Supongo que porque me he acostumbrado a hacerlo -respondió Magdalen.

- ¡Ay, ay! -dijo el veterano marino-. Es por eso, ¿eh? Bueno, querida, la razón por la que tú te haces la raya en el medio es la misma por la que yo duermo ante la puerta del almirante. ¡Sé cómo tratarlas! -dijo el viejo Mazey riendo entre dientes, pasándose al soliloquio y agitando su cerveza con aire triunfal-. ¡Sé cómo tratarlas!

El tercero y último intento de Magdalen por resolver el misterio de la cama con ruedas lo realizó mientras servía la cena al almirante. Las preguntas del anciano caballero le dieron la oportunidad de referirse al tema sin que pareciera una osadía o una falta de respeto, pero el almirante resultó ser tan impenetrable, a su modo, como el viejo Mazey y la señora Drake.

- No es asunto tuyo, querida -dijo el almirante sin rodeos-. No seas curiosa. Coge tu Viejo Testamento cuando bajes y lee lo que ocurrió en el Jardín del Edén por culpa de la curiosidad. Sé buena chica y no imites a tu madre Eva.

Esa noche, cuando Magdalen pasó por el segundo piso de camino a su dormitorio, se detuvo ante el corredor y escuchó. Un biombo protegía la entrada del corredor de las miradas de los que subían. Los ronquidos que Magdalen oyó al otro lado del biombo la alentaron a rodearlo sigilosamente y dar unos cuantos pasos. Amortiguando con la mano libre la luz de la vela que llevaba, se acercó a la puerta del almirante y observó con sorpresa que habían movido la cama de donde la había visto durante el día para colocarla exactamente atravesada junto a la puerta de modo que cerraba el paso a cualquiera que intentara entrar en la habitación del almirante. Después de este hallazgo, la persona del viejo Mazey, roncando a pierna suelta con el gorro rojo de pescador calado hasta las cejas y las mantas hasta la nariz, se convirtió en un objeto de importancia secundaria en comparación con su cama. A Magdalen ya no le cabía la menor duda de que el veterano marino hacía guardia literalmente ante la puerta de su amo y de que él, el almirante y el ama de llaves compartían el secreto de este extraño proceder.

«Un extraño final -pensó Magdalen, meditando sobre su descubrimiento mientras ascendía por la escalera hacia su dormitorio-. Un extraño final para un extraño día.»

CAPÍTULO II

Pasó la primera semana, pasó la segunda, y Magdalen no parecía más cerca de descubrir el fideicomiso secreto que el primer día de servicio en St. Crux.

Pero la quincena, pese a carecer de incidentes, no fue una quincena perdida. La experiencia la había convencido ya de un importante punto: le había demostrado que podía desafiar la arraigada desconfianza de las otras criadas. Con el tiempo, las mujeres se habían acostumbrado a su presencia en la casa, aunque sin abandonar la convicción de que la recién llegada no era una de ellas. Todo lo que podía hacer en su defensa era mantener su instintiva suspicacia femenina dentro de los límites puramente negativos que había ocupado desde el principio, y lo consiguió.

Día tras día, las mujeres la observaban con la infatigable vigilancia de la malicia y la desconfianza, y día tras día ni un solo avance hacia el hallazgo recompensaba sus esfuerzos. En silencio, con inteligencia y aplicación, con el recuerdo siempre presente de quién era y de su posición, la nueva camarera hacía su trabajo. Los únicos ratos de descanso y relajación eran los que pasaba de vez en cuando con los perros y el viejo Mazey de día, y el precioso intervalo de tiempo nocturno en el que se hallaba a salvo de ser observada en la soledad de su cuarto. Gracias a la abundancia de habitaciones en St. Crux, cada una de las sirvientas tenía la posibilidad de dormir en una propia si lo deseaba. Sola en la noche, Magdalen podía atreverse a ser ella misma; podía soñar con el pasado y despertarse del sueño sin que ojos curiosos vieran que lloraba; podía meditar sobre el futuro sin que los susurros la asaltaran desde los rincones, acusándola de «llevar algo entre manos».

Convencida por el momento de la absoluta seguridad de su situación en la casa, aprovechó también una segunda oportunidad en su favor -antes de que concluyera la quincena- que alivió su espíritu de todas las posibles dudas sobre el formidable asunto de la señora Lecount.

En parte por los chismes de las mujeres durante las comidas en el comedor de los criados y en parte por un párrafo señalado en un periódico suizo que halló una mañana abierto sobre el butacón del almirante, Magdalen obtuvo la agradable garantía de que esta vez no había temor alguno a que el ama de llaves hiciese una peligrosa aparición en escena. Al parecer la señora Lecount había pasado más de una semana en St. Crux a partir de la fecha de la muerte de su amo, y luego había abandonado Inglaterra para vivir de las rentas de su legado en un honorable y próspero retiro en su lugar natal. El párrafo del periódico suizo describía la consecución de este laudable proyecto. La señora Lecount no sólo se había establecido en Zurich, sino que (consciente de la precariedad de la vida) también había determinado el uso que se daría a su fortuna cuando ella muriera. La mitad iría a parar a los fondos de una «Beca Lecompte» para estudiantes pobres en la Universidad de Ginebra. La otra mitad tendrían que emplearla las autoridades municipales de Zurich en la manutención y educación de un cierto número de niñas huérfanas, originarias de la ciudad, a las que se prepararía para el servicio doméstico. El articulista suizo hacía alusión a estos filantrópicos legados en un estrafalario panegírico. Se felicitaba a Zurich por poseer un dechado de virtudes públicas, y de la comparación entre la señora Lecount y Guillermo Tell como benefactores de Suiza, este último salía malparado.

Empezó la tercera semana y Magdalen se hallaba ya en disposición de dar su primer paso en dirección al hallazgo del fideicomiso secreto.

Gracias al viejo Mazey averiguó que su amo tenía la costumbre de ocupar las habitaciones del ala norte durante los meses de invierno y primavera, y de cruzar el Paso Ártico de Hielahuesos y vivir en las habitaciones orientadas al este que daban al jardín en verano y otoño. Mientras el salón de banquetes permaneciera húmedo y desmantelado debido a los escasos recursos financieros del almirante y mientras el interior de St. Crux se viera así incómodamente dividido en dos residencias separadas,

no había arreglo mejor que aquél. De vez en cuando (según dio a entender a Magdalen su informador) había días, tanto en invierno como en verano, en que el almirante se inquietaba por las habitaciones que no ocupaba en ese momento e insistía en comprobar el estado de los muebles, los libros y los cuadros con sus propios ojos. En tales ocasiones -tanto en invierno como en verano- se mantenía encendido un gran fuego en la chimenea del salón de banquetes durante varios días antes, así como el carbón en el trípode, para tener la estancia todo lo cálida que permitieran las circunstancias. Tan pronto como se calmaban las inquietudes del anciano caballero, las habitaciones volvían a cerrarse y se abandonaba de nuevo a Hielahuesos a la humedad, la desolación y la ruina. Hacía pocos días que había concluido una de esas migraciones temporales; el almirante se había convencido de que las habitaciones del ala este no habían empeorado en absoluto por culpa de la ausencia de su amo y ahora se podía contar con que permanecería en el ala norte durante semanas; quizá, si la estación era fría, durante los próximos meses.

Por insignificantes que fueran en sí mismos, estos detalles tenían una gran importancia para Magdalen, pues la ayudaron a fijar los límites de su campo de búsqueda. Suponiendo que, con toda probabilidad, el almirante guardara todos sus documentos importantes a mano, estaba casi segura de que el fideicomiso secreto estaba guardado en alguna habitación del ala norte.

¿En qué habitación? La pregunta no tenía una respuesta fácil.

De las cuatro habitaciones habitables que estaban a disposición del almirante durante el día -es decir, el comedor, la biblioteca, la salita y el salón al que se llegaba desde el vestíbulo-, la biblioteca parecía ser la estancia en la que pasaba con preferencia la mayor parte de su tiempo. En esta habitación había una mesa con cajones que se cerraban con llave, había cinco armaritos bajo los estantes de libros, todos ellos cerrados con llave. Había receptáculos igualmente cerrados en las otras habitaciones, y en todos ellos podían guardarse documentos.

Magdalen había acudido a la llamada de la campanilla y había visto al almirante abriendo y cerrando cajones y armarios, ora en una habitación, ora en otra, pero sobre todo en la biblioteca. En ocasiones había observado que la expresión del almirante era temerosa e impaciente cuando se volvía para mirarla y darle órdenes junto a un bargueño o un armario abiertos, y Magdalen dedujo que algo relacionado con sus bienes y documentos -podía o no tratarse del fideicomiso secreto- lo acuciaba y molestaba de vez en cuando. En más de una ocasión, le había oído guardar algo bajo llave en una de las habitaciones, salir y meterse en otra habitación, aguardar allí unos minutos, regresar luego a la primera habitación con las llaves en la mano y andar en los cerrojos una y otra vez con brusquedad. Esta nerviosa intranquilidad con respecto a las llaves y los armarios podía ser consecuencia de un carácter inquieto, agravado en un hombre activo por naturaleza por la indolencia de la vida retirada, una vida que vagaba continuamente entre insignificancias, sin una tarea regular en todo el día que le diera estabilidad. Por otro lado, era igualmente probable que tanto ir y venir, tanto abrir y cerrar, pudieran atribuirse a la existencia de una responsabilidad privada que se hubiera entrometido inesperadamente en la apacible existencia de un anciano y que le atormentara con una sensación opresiva desconocida hasta aquellos últimos años. Cualquiera de estas dos interpretaciones podía explicar la conducta del almirante de una forma razonable y probable. En la situación de Magdalen, era imposible decir cuál era la interpretación correcta.

Un único hecho cierto pudo comprobar desde el primer día de observación: el almirante era un hombre muy cuidadoso con sus llaves.

Todas las llaves pequeñas las tenía en una anilla, en el bolsillo del pecho de su levita. Las más grandes las guardaba juntas por lo general, pero no siempre, en uno de los cajones de la mesa de la biblioteca. Algunas veces las dejaba allí durante la noche; otras, se las llevaba consigo al dormitorio en un pequeño cesto. No tenía horarios regulares para dejarlas o llevárselas consigo, no había razón aparente para que una vez las guardara bajo llave en un cajón de la mesa de la biblioteca y en otra ocasión las guardara en cualquier otro lugar. La obstinación y el capricho impenitente de su

conducta a ese respecto desafiaba todo intento por hallar en ella un sistema y frustraba todos los esfuerzos por preverla de antemano.

La esperanza de obtener alguna información definitiva que le permitiera actuar tendiendo al almirante astutas celadas en sus conversaciones resultó ser completamente vana desde el principio.

En la situación de Magdalen, todo experimento de ese tipo habría sido muy difícil y peligroso con cualquier hombre; con el almirante, sencillamente era imposible. Su tendencia a derivar de un tema a otro; su costumbre de mantener la lengua siempre ocupada mientras hubiera alguien, fuera quien fuese, al alcance de su voz; su cómica falta de dignidad y reserva con las sirvientas prometía mucho en apariencia, y en realidad no servía para nada. Por tímida y respetuosa que se mostrara, siempre que intentaba aprovecharse de esta actitud de su amo o de la evidente simpatía que sentía por ella, el anciano descubría en el acto cada avance de Magdalen desde su propia posición y la ponía al instante en su sitio con un extraño buen humor que no producía ofensa, pero también con una franqueza tan directa que no ofrecía salida. Por contradictorio que pueda parecer, el almirante Bartram era demasiado familiar para ser abordado; mantenía la distancia entre él y su criada con mayor eficacia que si hubiera sido el hombre más orgulloso de Inglaterra. La reserva sistemática de un superior hacia un inferior puede a veces ser superada; la familiaridad sistemática jamás.

El tiempo transcurría lentamente. La cuarta semana dio comienzo y Magdalen no había descubierto nada. Sus expectativas eran nulas. Aun en el caso, en apariencia desesperado, de que hallara el modo de hacerse con las llaves del almirante, no podía contar con retenerlas más que unas pocas horas sin despertar sospechas; horas que podían desperdiciarse completamente por no saber en qué dirección emprender la búsqueda. El fideicomiso podía estar guardado en cualquiera de los veinte receptáculos para papeles ubicados en cuatro habitaciones diferentes. Y Magdalen no tenía la menor idea de la habitación en que podía mirar, ni qué receptáculo era el más prometedor para empezar, ni qué posición con respecto a los demás documentos podía esperarse que ocupara el único de ellos que le era necesario. Impedida por incertidumbres insuperables de toda índole, condenada, por así decirlo, a vagar con los ojos vendados al borde mismo del éxito, aguardaba Magdalen la oportunidad que no llegaba, el suceso que nunca ocurría, con una paciencia que se estaba convirtiendo ya en la paciencia de la desesperación.

Noche tras noche, volvía la vista hacia los días pasados y no se alzaba en su memoria acontecimiento alguno que los distinguiera entre sí. Las únicas interrupciones en la monótona uniformidad de la vida en St. Crux las causaban las fechorías características del viejo Mazey y de los perros.

De vez en cuando, el carácter salvaje original resurgía en el temperamento de *Brutus* y *Cassius*. Las modestas comodidades del hogar, los sabrosos encantos de los estofados, el decoroso deleite de las digestiones llevadas a cabo sobre las esteras frente al fuego, todo perdía su atractivo y los perros ingratos abandonaban la casa para buscar aventuras y disipación en el mundo exterior. En esas ocasiones, la conversación formularia de preguntas y respuestas que en la sobremesa mantenían el viejo Mazey y su señor variaba en un pequeño detalle. A «Dios salve a la reina, Mazey» y «¿Qué viento tenemos, Magdalen?» les seguía: «¿Dónde están los perros, Mazey?». Y «Han soltado amarras, señoría, los condenados» era la invariable respuesta del veterano marino. El almirante siempre suspiraba y meneaba gravemente la cabeza al oír la noticia, como si *Brutus* y *Cassius* fueran sus hijos y le trataran con una falta del debido respeto filial. Los perros regresaban siempre al cabo de dos o tres días, flacos, sucios y avergonzados. Invariablemente, durante todo el día siguiente permanecían atados, caídos en desgracia. Un día más y los cepillaban para dejarlos limpios y eran entonces readmitidos formalmente en el comedor. Allí, la civilización, actuando con sutileza por medio de una cacerola, volvía a adueñarse de ellos, y a los dos hijos pródigos del almirante se les hacía la boca agua al ver que quitaban las tapas de las cazuelas, como siempre.

El viejo Mazey, a su manera, resultó que en ciertas ocasiones tenía inclinaciones tan

lamentables como los perros. De vez en cuando también su carácter salvaje original surgía a la superficie; también él perdía el gusto por las comodidades de la casa y la abandonaba con ingratitud. Solía desaparecer a media tarde y regresar de noche, borracho como una cuba. Era un marino demasiado experimentado para que sobreviniera ningún desastre en tales ocasiones. Puede que sus picaras y viejas piernas le hicieran dar rodeos, pero no le fallaban jamás; puede que sus picaros y viejos ojos vieran doble, pero siempre le mostraban el camino de vuelta a casa. Por mucho que lo intentaban, las criadas no conseguían nunca persuadirle de que estaba borracho; él siempre desdeñaba tal imputación. Se negaba incluso a admitir la idea hasta haber comprobado personalmente su estado mediante un infalible criterio propio.

En esos casos de emergencia báquica, tenía la costumbre de tambalearse obstinadamente hacia su habitación de la planta baja para sacar del armarito la miniatura del barco y probar si podía seguir con la tarea, que jamás completaría, de aparejar el barco. Cuando había aplastado los palos diminutos y roto en pedazos las delicadas cuerdas, entonces y sólo entonces, admitía el veterano los hechos con la autoridad de la evidencia. «¡Ay, ay! -solía decir para sí-. Las mujeres tienen razón. ¡Otra vez borracho, Mazey, otra vez borracho!» Hecho este descubrimiento, solía aguardar astutamente en la planta baja hasta que el almirante se metía en su cuarto y luego subía por las escaleras calzado con discretas zapatillas de orillo para ocupar su puesto. La cautela le recomendaba que no intentara meterse en la cama con ruedas (lo que hubiera constituido una invitación a la catástrofe si por casualidad se caía contra la puerta de su amo), de modo que se paseaba de un extremo al otro del corredor hasta recuperar la serenidad. En más de una ocasión, Magdalen había asomado la cabeza desde el otro lado del biombo y había visto al viejo lobo de mar haciendo su guardia con paso vacilante, imaginándose a sí mismo de nuevo de servicio en un barco. «Este barco es excepcionalmente movido con mar gruesa» solía musitar cuando sus piernas lo llevaban en zigzag al otro lado del pasillo o lo dejaban momentáneamente paralizado, estudiando los «puntos del compás» con la espalda apoyada en la pared, según su propio sistema. «Una noche espantosa, cuidado -decía sin dejar de divagar y dando otra vuelta-. Negra como boca de lobo, y con el viento otra vez en contra.» Al día siguiente, el viejo Mazey habría de quedarse en la planta baja, caído en desgracia, como los perros. Y al otro día, recuperaba sus privilegios, también como los perros, y se introducía un nuevo cambio en la fórmula de la sobremesa. Al entrar en el comedor, el viejo marino se detenía en seco y, con la espalda apoyada en la puerta, presentaba sus disculpas de la siguiente forma, breve pero cabal:

- Por favor, señoría, estoy avergonzado de mí mismo. -Así empezaba y concluía la disculpa.

- No debe volver a ocurrir, Mazey -solía responder el almirante.

- No volverá a ocurrir, señoría.

- Muy bien. Ven y tómate tu vaso de vino. Dios bendiga a la reina, Mazey. -El veterano marino bebía su oporto de un trago y el diálogo concluía como era habitual.

Así pasaron los días, sin incidentes de mayor importancia que aliviaran la monotonía, hasta que se acercó el final de la cuarta semana.

El último día se produjo un acontecimiento; el último día, la promesa de futuro tanto tiempo diferida empezó a renacer inesperadamente. Mientras Magdalen extendía el mantel sobre la mesa del comedor, como de costumbre, la señora Drake entró brevemente y, por primera vez, le ordenó que pusiera la mesa para dos personas. El almirante había recibido carta de su sobrino. Esperaban el regreso del señor George Bartram esa misma tarde.

CAPÍTULO III

Tras colocar un segundo cubierto, Magdalen aguardó a que sonara la campanilla de la cena con un interés y una impaciencia que no le resultaba fácil disimular. Con toda probabilidad, el regreso del señor Bartram produciría alteraciones en la rutina de la casa; esto la hacía concebir esperanzas de que algún cambio, de cualquier tipo, por pequeño que fuera, la ayudaría en su empeño. Tal vez el sobrino fuera accesible a las estratagemas que habían fracasado con el tío. En cualquier caso, los dos hombres hablarían de sus asuntos durante la cena, y bien podía ser que gracias a estas conversaciones -mantenidas día tras día en su presencia- el camino hacia el descubrimiento, absolutamente invisible ahora, se mostrara tarde o temprano.

Por fin sonó la campanilla, se abrió la puerta y los dos caballeros entraron juntos en la habitación.

A Magdalen le sorprendió, como antes le había ocurrido a su hermana, el parecido que guardaba George Bartram con su padre, según éste aparecía en el retrato de Combe-Raven que representaba a Andrew Vanstone en sus años mozos. Los cabellos claros y el rostro colorado, los brillantes ojos azules y la figura erguida y robusta, familiares para Magdalen gracias al retrato, acudieron a su memoria cuando el sobrino siguió al tío y ocupó su sitio en la mesa. Magdalen no estaba preparada para aquel súbito renacer de los recuerdos del hogar perdido. Perdió la compostura al intentar ocultar el efecto que aquella impresión le producía y cometió, por primera vez desde que había entrado en la casa, un error en el servicio de la mesa.

Una original reprimenda del almirante, mitad en serio, mitad en broma, le dio tiempo para recobrar la serenidad. Se arriesgó a mirar a George Bartram una segunda vez. En esta ocasión, el efecto que causó en ella despertó de inmediato la curiosidad de Magdalen. El ceño y la actitud del joven delataban claramente una gran preocupación. Miraba el plato con mayor frecuencia que al almirante; sin embargo, a Magdalen no la miró en absoluto (salvo para echar una ojeada a la nueva camarera cuando el almirante se la señaló). Era obvio que sus pensamientos estaban turbados por la incertidumbre y un gran peso estorbaba su natural desenvoltura. ¿Qué incertidumbre? ¿Qué peso? ¿Surgiría alguna revelación paulatinamente en el curso de la conversación durante la cena?

No. Unos platos sucedieron a otros y no se produjo ningún tipo de revelación íntima. La conversación se desenvolvía con interrupciones entre asuntos públicos por un lado e insignificantes temas personales por el otro. La política, interior y exterior, se turnó con la pequeña historia doméstica de St. Crux; los líderes de la revolución que habían expulsado a Luis Felipe del trono de Francia marcharon codo con codo en la revista de la cena con el viejo Mazey y los perros. El postre llegó a la mesa, el viejo lobo de mar entró en el comedor, hizo su brindis de lealtad, presentó sus respetos al «señorito George» y salió. Magdalen le siguió de camino a las dependencias de la servidumbre sin haber oído nada en toda la conversación que tuviera la menor importancia para el progreso de su proyecto. Se esforzó por no desanimarse y aguardar con esperanza el día siguiente. Difícilmente hablarían de nuevo de la revolución francesa y de los perros.

Tenía tiempo; el tiempo podía hacer milagros, y ella tenía todo el tiempo del mundo.

A solas para la sobremesa y el vino, tío y sobrino acercaron sus butacones a ambos lados de la chimenea y, en ausencia de Magdalen, iniciaron la conversación que a ella tanto le hubiera interesado oír.

- ¿Clarete, George? -dijo el almirante, empujando la botella hacia el otro lado de la mesa-. Pareces abatido.

- Estoy un poco preocupado, señor -respondió George, dejando el vaso vacío y mirando

fijamente el fuego.

- Me alegro de oírlo -replicó el almirante-. Te aseguro que yo estoy más que preocupado. ¡Estamos a últimos de marzo y no has hecho nada! El plazo se te acaba el tres de mayo y ahí estás tú, sentado como si aún te quedaran años para decidirte.

George sonrió y se sirvió más vino con gesto resignado.

- ¿Debo entender, señor, que hablaba en serio sobre lo que me dijo en noviembre? -preguntó-. ¿Está usted resuelto a imponerme esa incomprensible condición?

- Yo no la encuentro incomprensible -dijo el almirante con irritación.

- ¿No, señor? Voy a heredar todos sus bienes sin otra condición, como usted ha estipulado generosamente desde el principio; pero no podré tocar ni un solo penique de la fortuna que le dejó el pobre Noel, a menos que me case en un determinado plazo. La casa y las tierras serán mías (gracias a su bondad), cualesquiera que sean las circunstancias; pero el dinero con el que podría mejorar ambas cosas me será negado de manera arbitraria si no soy un hombre casado el tres de mayo. ¡Puede que esté lastimosamente privado de inteligencia, pero jamás había oído hablar de un proceder más incomprensible!

- ¡Nada de responder y gruñir a tus mayores, George! Di lo que tengas que decir. ¡No entendemos los sarcasmos en la Marina de Su Majestad!

- No es mi intención ofenderle, señor, pero creo que no ha sido justo conmigo dejándome pasmado con este cambio de actitud, enteramente opuesto a su carácter por lo que yo sé; y luego, cuando lógicamente le pido una explicación, da media vuelta fríamente y me deja a oscuras. Si usted y Noel llegaron a algún acuerdo secreto antes de que él redactara su testamento, ¿por qué no me lo dice? ¿Por qué crear entre nosotros un misterio innecesario?

- ¡No me engañarás, George! -exclamó el almirante, tamborileando furiosamente sobre la mesa con el cascanueces-. Intentas sonsacarme con impertinencias, ¡pero no voy a dejarme! Pondré las condiciones que me plazcan y no responderé de ellas ante nadie a menos que lo desee. Ya es bastante malo que sobre mis desdichados hombros hayan recaído preocupaciones y responsabilidades que nunca pedí (olvídate de esas preocupaciones, no son tuyas sino mías) para que me interroguen y me vuelvan a interrogar como si fuera testigo en un juicio. ¡Menudo es éste! -apostrofó el almirante con viva irritación, dirigiéndose a los perros que estaban tumbados sobre la alfombra de la chimenea a falta de un público mejor-. ¡Menudo es éste! Le piden que se sirva a su gusto de dos cosas extraordinariamente cómodas (una fortuna y una esposa); se le dan seis meses para conseguir la esposa (en la Marina tendríamos que haberla encontrado, con todas sus pertenencias, en seis días); tiene, que yo sepa, una docena de hermosas jóvenes a su disposición en diferentes partes del país; ¿y qué hace él? ¡Permanece de brazos cruzados mes tras mes, deja que las jóvenes languidezcan en la flor de la edad, y fastidia a su tío preguntándole el porqué! Compadezco a las desventuradas mujeres. En mis tiempos los hombres tenían sangre en las venas, y en gran cantidad. Ahora son máquinas.

- Sólo puedo repetir, señor, que lamento haberle ofendido -dijo George.

- ¡Bah, bah! No es necesario que me mires con esa languidez si tanto lo lamentas -replicó el almirante-. Dedícate a tu vino y te perdonaré. A tu salud, George. Me alegro de verte de nuevo en St. Crux. ¡Fíjate en esa bandeja de esponjosos bizcochos! La cocinera los ha preparado en tu honor. No podemos herir sus sentimientos, pero tampoco estropear el vino. ¡Tomad! -El almirante arrojó cuatro bizcochos en rápida sucesión a las gargantas complacientes de los perros-. Lo siento, George -prosiguió el anciano caballero con expresión grave-. Siento de verdad que no le hayas echado el ojo a una de esas hermosas jóvenes. No sabes la pérdida que supondrá para ti, no sabes la inquietud y la mortificación que me causas con esta indecisión tuya.

- Si me permitiera usted que me explicara, señor, tendría una opinión muy diferente de

mí. Estoy dispuesto a casarme mañana mismo si la dama me acepta.

- ¡Qué diablos! Así que le has echado el ojo a una dama al fin y al cabo. En el nombre del Cielo, ¿por qué no me lo habías dicho antes? No importa, te lo perdono todo ahora que sé que le has echado el guante a una esposa. Vuelve a llenarte el vaso. Un vaso lleno para brindar a su salud. ¿Quién es, por cierto?

- Se lo diré en seguida, almirante. Cuando hemos empezado esta conversación le he dicho que estaba un poco preocupado...

- No figura entre mi docena de hermosas jóvenes. ¡Aja, señorito George, se lo veo en la cara! ¿Por qué estás preocupado?

- Temo que desaprobará usted mi elección, señor.

- ¡No te andes por las ramas! ¿Cómo diablos voy a decir si la apruebo o no si no quieres decirme quién es?

- Es la hija mayor de Andrew Vanstone, de Combe-Raven.

- ¡¡¿Quién?!!

- La señorita Vanstone, señor.

El almirante dejó el vaso sin probar el vino.

- Tenías razón, George -dijo-. No apruebo tu elección, la desapruebo totalmente.

- ¿Es a la desgracia de su nacimiento a lo que pone usted reparos, señor?

- ¡Dios me libre! La desgracia de su nacimiento no es culpa suya, pobre. Sabes tan bien como yo, George, a qué le pongo reparos.

- ¿A su hermana?

- ¡Por supuesto! El hombre más liberal del mundo le pondría reparos, creo yo.

- Es injusto que la señorita Vanstone tenga que sufrir por los errores de su hermana.

- ¿Errores los llamas tú? George, tienes una memoria muy selectiva cuando te interesa.

- Llámelos crímenes si lo desea, señor. Vuelvo a decirle que es injusto con la señorita Vanstone. La vida de la señorita Vanstone es irreprochable. Desde el principio ha soportado su triste suerte con una paciencia, una dulzura y un valor tales como no hubiera demostrado una entre mil mujeres en su lugar. Pregúntele a la señorita Garth, que la conoce desde la infancia. Pregúntele a la señora Tyrrel, que bendice el día en que ella entró en su casa...

- ¡Pregúntaselo al palo de la escoba! Perdóname, George, pero acabas con la paciencia de un santo. Mi buen muchacho, no niego las virtudes de la señorita Vanstone. Admito, si tú quieres, que es la mejor mujer que se haya puesto jamás unas enaguas. Ésa no es la cuestión...

- Discúlpeme, almirante, ésa es precisamente la cuestión si ha de ser mi esposa.

- Escúchame, George. Míralo desde mi punto de vista. ¿Qué hizo tu primo Noel? Tu primo Noel fue víctima, el pobre, de una de las conspiraciones más ruines de las que he oído hablar, y la principal instigadora de esa conspiración fue la detestable hermana de la señorita Vanstone. Ella lo engañó de la manera más infame y, en cuanto consiguió un bonito legado en su testamento, tenía el veneno preparado para quitarle la vida. Ésa es la verdad. Lo sabemos por la señora Lecount, que encontró el frasco guardado bajo llave en su propio dormitorio. Si te casas con la señorita Vanstone, esa miserable se convertirá en tu cuñada. Pasará a ser un miembro de nuestra familia. La deshonra de lo que ha hecho y de lo que aún podría hacer (y estando como está poseída por el Diablo,

no sabemos a qué extremos podría llegar) se convierte en nuestra propia deshonra. Dios mío, George, ¡piensa bien en la posición en que te colocas! Piensa en lo que significaría ser el cuñado de esa mujer.

- Ha expuesto usted su lado de la cuestión, almirante -dijo George con tono decidido-; ahora déjeme exponer el mío. Una señorita, a la que conozco en circunstancias muy interesantes, produce cierto efecto sobre mí. No me precipito de cabeza incitado por esa impresión, como hubiera hecho siendo unos años más joven; espero y la pongo a prueba. Cada vez que veo a esa señorita, la impresión se refuerza: su belleza es más grande a mis ojos, su carácter me gusta más y más. Cuando estoy lejos de ella estoy inquieto e insatisfecho; cuando estoy con ella soy el hombre más feliz del mundo. Todo lo que me cuentan sobre su conducta los que mejor la conocen me confirma la elevada opinión que me he formado. El único inconveniente que descubro está motivado por una desgracia de la que ella no es responsable; la de tener una hermana totalmente indigna de ella. ¿Destruye este descubrimiento (desagradable, lo reconozco) todas aquellas buenas cualidades de la señorita Vanstone por las que la amo y la admiro? Nada de eso, sólo consigue hacer, en comparación, que aprecie más aún sus cualidades. Si ha de haber un inconveniente contra el que luchar (y cómo puede ser de otra forma en este mundo), prefiero que ese inconveniente se refiera a la hermana de mi mujer y no a mi mujer. La hermana de mi mujer no es esencial para mi felicidad, pero mi mujer sí. En mi opinión, señor, la señora de Noel Vanstone ha causado ya suficiente daño; no veo la necesidad de dejar que cause más privándome de una buena esposa. Correcto o equivocado, éste es mi punto de vista. No deseo molestarle más con cuestiones sentimentales. Sólo deseo añadir que tengo edad suficiente para saber lo que quiero y que estoy decidido. Si mi matrimonio es vital para la ejecución de sus intenciones en mi favor, sólo hay una mujer en el mundo con la que pueda casarme; esa mujer es la señorita Vanstone.

Era inútil oponerse a esta rotunda afirmación. El almirante Bartram se levantó de su asiento sin decir nada y se paseó de un lado a otro, con gran inquietud.

La situación era en verdad grave. La muerte de la señora Girdlestone había hecho fracasar ya uno de los objetivos considerados en el fideicomiso secreto. Si llegaba el tres de mayo y George seguía siendo soltero, el segundo (y último) de los objetivos habría fracasado a su vez. En poco más de una quincena, a más tardar, tenían que publicarse las amonestaciones en la iglesia de Ossory o no se cumpliría el plazo de una de las estipulaciones en las que insistía el fideicomiso. Pese a que el almirante era terco por naturaleza y pese a las firmes objeciones que sentía con respecto a la alianza proyectada por su sobrino, empezó a echarse atrás mientras paseaba por la estancia y se enfrentaba a los hechos desde cada extremo, pues al mirar a George a la cara veía que éstos seguían inamovibles.

- ¿Te has prometido con la señorita Vanstone? -preguntó de repente.

- No, señor -respondió George-. He creído que tenía la obligación de hablar primero con usted por la bondad que siempre me ha mostrado.

- Muy agradecido, te lo aseguro. Y has ido aplazando lo de hablar conmigo hasta el último momento, como haces con todo lo demás. ¿Crees que la señorita Vanstone te aceptará cuando se lo pidas?

George vaciló.

- ¡Que el diablo se lleve tu modestia! -gritó el almirante-. Éste no es momento para la modestia, es el momento de hablar claro. ¿Te aceptará, sí o no?

- Creo que sí, señor.

El almirante soltó una carcajada sardónica y dio otra vuelta por la habitación. De pronto se detuvo, se metió las manos en los bolsillos y se quedó parado en un rincón, sumido en hondas reflexiones. Tras unos cuantos minutos, su expresión se animó un tanto, iluminada por una nueva idea. Volvió con paso vivo junto a George y posó la mano

bondadosamente sobre el hombro de su sobrino.

- Estás equivocado, George -dijo-, pero ahora ya es demasiado tarde para enmendar tu error. El dieciséis del mes próximo tienen que correr las amonestaciones en la iglesia de Ossory o perderás el dinero. ¿Le has explicado a la señorita Vanstone en qué situación estás? ¿O también eso lo has aplazado hasta el último momento como todo lo demás?

- La situación es tan extraordinaria, señor, y podría conducir a tal tergiversación de mis motivos, que no he querido mencionarla. Ni siquiera sé cómo explicárselo.

- Prueba contándoselo a sus allegados. Hazles saber que es una cuestión de dinero, y ellos vencerán sus escrúpulos, si tú no puedes. Pero no es eso lo que quería decirte. ¿Cuánto tiempo piensas quedarte aquí esta vez?

- Había pensado quedarme unos días y luego…

- Y luego volver a Londres y pedir su mano, supongo. ¿Tendrías bastante con una semana para probar suerte con la señorita Vanstone?, una semana de la quincena que te queda aún.

- Me quedaré aquí una semana con sumo gusto, almirante, si usted lo desea.

- No lo deseo. Quiero que recojas tus cosas y te vayas mañana.

George miró a su tío boquiabierto.

- Has encontrado unas cartas esperándote cuando has llegado -prosiguió el almirante-. ¿Era de mi viejo amigo, sir Franklin Brock, una de esas cartas?

- Sí, señor.

- ¿Era una invitación para ir a la Grange?

- Sí, señor.

- ¿Para ir de inmediato?

- De inmediato, si me era posible.

- Muy bien. Quiero que te sea posible. Quiero que te vayas a la Grange mañana.

George volvió a mirar el fuego y suspiró con impaciencia.

- Ahora le comprendo, almirante -dijo-. Está usted completamente equivocado conmigo. No conseguirá hacer vacilar mi afecto por la señorita Vanstone de esa manera.

El almirante Bartram reanudó su paseo por la habitación como si se hallara en el alcázar de su navío.

- Amor con amor se paga, George -dijo el anciano caballero-. Si yo estoy dispuesto a hacer concesiones por mi parte, lo menos que puedes hacer es responder con concesiones por tu parte.

- No lo niego, señor.

- Muy bien. Ahora escucha mi propuesta. Escúchame con imparcialidad, George, es el derecho de todo hombre. Seré absolutamente justo. No pretendo negar que tú crees con gran sinceridad que la señorita Vanstone es la única mujer en el mundo que puede hacerte feliz. Eso no lo pongo en duda. Lo que pongo en duda es si realmente sabes lo que sientes tan bien como tú crees. No puedes negarme, George, que hasta hoy has estado enamorado de una buena cantidad de mujeres, entre ellas, la señorita Brock. Sin ir más lejos, el año pasado por estas fechas había un secreto entendimiento entre esa señorita y tú, por un decir. ¡Y bien que hacías! La señorita Brock es una de esa docena de jóvenes que he mencionado con nuestro primer vaso de vino.

- Confunde usted un frívolo coqueteo con un cariño sincero, señor -dijo George-. Está usted completamente equivocado, de verdad que lo está.

- Es muy probable. No pretendo ser infalible; eso se lo dejo a los jóvenes. Pero da la casualidad, George, de que te conozco desde que no medías más que mi viejo telescopio, y quiero poner a prueba ese cariño sincero del que hablas. Si puedes demostrarme que estás entregado a la señorita Vanstone en cuerpo y alma como tú supones, tendré que ceder por fuerza y guardarme mis objeciones para mí solo. Pero primero tendrás que convencerme. Vete a la Grange mañana y quédate allí una semana disfrutando de la compañía de la señorita Brock. Dale a esa encantadora joven la oportunidad de encender la vieja llama, y luego vuelve a St. Crux y hazme saber el resultado. Si me dices, con toda honradez, que tu cariño por la señorita Vanstone sigue inalterable, habrás oído mis últimas objeciones a partir de ese momento. Aunque persistan mis dudas, no diré ni haré nada en contra de tus deseos. Ésta es mi propuesta. Puede que a tus ojos no sea más que la locura de un viejo, pero el viejo no te molestará mucho más, George, y cuando tengas hijos propios, podría ser agradable recordar que le seguiste la corriente en sus últimos días.

El almirante se acercó a la chimenea al decir estas palabras y posó una vez más la mano sobre el hombro de su sobrino. George se la cogió y la apretó afectuosamente. Su tío había sido un padre para él en el mejor y más cariñoso sentido de la palabra.

- Haré lo que me pide, señor -dijo-, si es lo que de verdad desea; pero debo decirle que el experimento será absolutamente inútil. De todas maneras, si prefiere que pase una semana en la Grange a que la pase aquí, a la Grange iré.

- Gracias, George -dijo el almirante con franqueza-. No esperaba menos de ti, y no me has decepcionado. -«Si la señorita Brock no nos saca de este embrollo -pensó el anciano caballero volviendo a su asiento junto a la mesa-, ¡es que el veleta de mi sobrino ha sentado realmente la cabeza!»-. Daremos la cuestión por zanjada esta noche, George -continuó en voz alta-, y buscaremos otro tema de conversación. Estas preocupaciones familiares no mejoran el sabor de mi viejo clarete. Quédate la botella. ¿Qué hay últimamente en los teatros de Londres? En mis tiempos, en la Marina siempre frecuentábamos el teatro. Solía gustarnos una buena tragedia para empezar y un baile de marineros para animarnos al final del espectáculo.

Durante el resto de la velada la charla fluyó por los cauces habituales. El almirante Bartram sólo volvió al tema prohibido cuando su sobrino y él se desearon las buenas noches.

- ¿No te olvidarás de lo de mañana, George?

- Por supuesto que no, señor. Me iré después del desayuno; conduciré yo mismo el coche de dos ruedas.

Antes del mediodía del día siguiente, el señor George Bartram había abandonado la casa y la última oportunidad de Magdalen se esfumaba con él.

CAPÍTULO IV

Cuando, el día de la partida de George Bartram, sonó en St. Crux, a la hora acostumbrada, la campanilla de la comida para los criados, se observó que el asiento de la nueva camarera estaba vacío. Enviaron a una de las criadas a su dormitorio para hacer averiguaciones, y ésta regresó con la información de que «Louisa» se sentía un poco débil y que rogaba que excusaran su presencia. Se invocó entonces la autoridad superior del ama de llaves. La señora Drake subió arriba inmediatamente para cerciorarse de la verdad por sí misma. Su primera mirada inquisitiva la convenció de que la indisposición de la camarera, fuera cual fuese la causa, no era fingida por pereza o malhumor. La camarera rechazó los remedios que le ofrecía el ama de llaves y se limitó a pedir permiso para probar la eficacia de un paseo al aire libre.

- Estaba acostumbrada a hacer más ejercicio del que hago aquí -explicó-. ¿Podría salir al jardín y probar qué tal me sienta un poco de aire fresco?

- Desde luego. ¿Podrás pasear sola o te envío a alguien para que te acompañe?

- Iré sola, si le parece, señora.

- Muy bien. Ponte el chal y el sombrero, y cuando salgas quédate en el jardín del ala este. Algunas veces el almirante pasea por el jardín del ala norte y podría sorprenderse si te viera allí. Ven a mi habitación cuando hayas hecho ejercicio y tomado el aire y veremos qué tal estás.

Minutos después, Magdalen se hallaba en el jardín del ala este. Lucía el sol en el cielo despejado, pero la fría sombra de la casa caía sobre la tapia del jardín y enfriaba el aire del mediodía. Magdalen caminó hacia las ruinas del antiguo monasterio, situado en el lado sur de la hilera de edificios más modernos. Allí había espacios abiertos y solitarios para respirar libremente, allí el pálido sol de marzo se filtraba por entre las aberturas que dejaban la desolación y la ruina y la tentaban con la reconfortante promesa de la primavera.

Subió tres o cuatro escalones de piedra hendida y se sentó en unos restos ruinosos a pleno sol. El lugar que había elegido era en otro tiempo la entrada a la iglesia. En siglos pretéritos, por allí transcurría un continuo desfile de pecados y sufrimientos humanos, día tras día, en dirección al confesionario, más allá de donde ella estaba sentada. De todas las desventuradas mujeres que habían hollado aquellas viejas piedras en época antigua, ninguna era tan desventurada como la mujer cuyos pies descansaban ahora sobre ellas.

Las manos de Magdalen temblaban cuando las colocó a los costados para sostenerse sobre el asiento de piedra. Las puso sobre el regazo y también temblaron. Las sostuvo en alto y las miró con perplejidad; temblaban mientras las miraba. «¡Como una vieja!», dijo débilmente, y volvió a dejarlas caer a los lados.

Esa mañana, por primera vez, se había visto obligada a admitir el cruel descubrimiento de que sus fuerzas empezaban a flaquear en el momento en que más confianza había depositado en ellas, cuando más las necesitaba. Había recibido la sorpresa de la inesperada partida del señor Bartram como si se tratara de una conmoción producida por la más horrible calamidad que hubiera podido acontecer. Aquel freno a sus esperanzas -que en otro tiempo hubiera servido tan sólo para reavivar su capacidad de resistencia y redoblar sus esfuerzos- causó en ella un terror tan asfixiante, la dejó postrada con una desesperación tan absoluta como si se hubiera producido el desastre culminante de su expulsión de St. Crux. Sólo un aviso podía interpretarse de un cambio así. En el espacio de tiempo de poco más de un año había acumulado las devastadoras y debilitadoras emociones de toda una vida. Los dones, la salud y la fuerza que tan pródigamente le había otorgado la Naturaleza empezaban a agotarse al fin tras ser maltratados con impunidad durante tanto tiempo.

Magdalen alzó la vista hacia el lejano y desvaído azul del cielo. Oyó los trinos gozosos de los pájaros entre la hiedra que cubría las ruinas. ¡Oh, la fría distancia de los cielos! ¡Oh, la despiadada alegría de los pájaros! ¡Oh, el horror solitario de hallarse allí sentada, sintiéndose vieja, débil y consumida en plena juventud! Se levantó con un último esfuerzo de la voluntad e intentó dominar el ataque de histeria que pugnaba por estallar en su pecho moviéndose y mirando lo que la rodeaba. Magdalen caminó de un lado a otro bajo el sol, cada vez más deprisa. El ejercicio la ayudó a través de la fatiga. Reprimió desesperadamente las lágrimas que pugnaban por asomar a sus ojos. Luchó contra el dolor que se aferraba a ella, y se libró de sus zarpas. Poco a poco, empezó a tener de nuevo la cabeza despejada; el miedo desesperado a sí misma empezó a ser menos vivido y real en sus pensamientos. Aún quedaban reservas de juventud y fortaleza en ella; había un alma, gravemente herida, pero aún no estaba vencida.

Poco a poco extendió los límites de su paseo; poco a poco recobró el uso de su poder de observación.

Los restos del monasterio no estaban tan ruinosos en su extremo oeste como los del este. En algunos lugares, donde aún se hallaban en pie los gruesos muros antiguos, se habían llevado a cabo reparaciones en otro tiempo. Se habían tendido toscos tejados de tejas rojas sobre cuatro de las antiguas celdas, se habían añadido puertas de madera, y las viejas celdas monásticas se habían convertido en cobertizos para guardar los muchos trastos viejos de St. Crux. Las puertas no tenían candados. Magdalen sólo tenía que abrirlas para que entrara la luz del sol sobre los despojos. Resolvió investigar los cobertizos uno por uno, no por curiosidad ni con la idea de hacer descubrimiento alguno: su único objetivo era matar el tiempo y evitar que los pensamientos que tanto la molestaban volvieran a aparecer.

El primer cobertizo que abrió contenía las herramientas del jardinero, grandes y pequeñas. El segundo estaba lleno de trozos de muebles, marcos comidos por la carcoma, vasos rotos, cajas sin tapa y libros a los que se había arrancado la encuadernación. Cuando, tras echar una ojeada indiferente, Magdalen se volvió para salir, su pie tropezó con alguna cosa en el suelo que tintineó contra un fragmento de porcelana rota. Magdalen se agachó y descubrió que el objeto que tintineaba era una llave oxidada.

Magdalen recogió la llave y la miró. Salió de nuevo al aire con la llave en la mano y reflexionó. Seguramente había más llaves viejas y oxidadas que personas. ¿Y si recogía todas las que encontrara y las probaba todas, una tras otra, en los cajones de gabinetes y armaritos que estaban siempre cerrados para ella? ¿Existía alguna posibilidad de que una de ellas encajara para justificar aquel riesgo? Si las cerraduras de St. Crux eran tan anticuadas como los muebles, si no tenían sutilezas de moderna invención, sin duda existía una posibilidad. ¿Quién podía decir si la llave misma que tenía en la mano no era el duplicado perdido de una de las llaves del manojo del almirante? Careciendo de otros medios para hallar el camino hacia su objetivo, valía la pena correr el riesgo. Una chispa del viejo espíritu centelleó en sus ojos cansados cuando dio media vuelta y entró de nuevo en el cobertizo.

Media hora más tarde había llegado al límite de tiempo que podía aventurarse a permanecer al aire libre. En ese intervalo, había registrado todos los cobertizos y había encontrado cinco llaves más. «¡Cinco oportunidades más!», pensó, mientras escondía las llaves y regresaba apresuradamente a la casa.

Tras ir a ver al ama de llaves a su habitación, subió a su dormitorio para quitarse el chal y el sombrero y aprovechó la oportunidad para guardar allí su botín hasta la noche. Las llaves tenían una gruesa capa de polvo y orín, pero no se atrevió a limpiarlas hasta que llegara la hora de acostarse y estuviera libre de las miradas curiosas de las criadas, en la soledad de su dormitorio.

Cuando durante la hora de la cena se encontró frente al almirante, como de costumbre, advirtió de inmediato un cambio en él. Por primera vez desde que lo conocía, el anciano caballero estaba callado y triste. Comió menos de lo habitual y apenas le dijo cinco palabras juntas desde el principio de la comida hasta el fin. Era evidente que sus

pensamientos estaban ocupados a su pesar por algún desagradable tema de reflexión. Durante la velada, Magdalen se preguntó de vez en cuando y con creciente perplejidad cuál podía ser ese tema.

Por fin las perezosas horas llegaron a su fin; era el momento de acostarse. Antes de dormir, Magdalen limpió todas las llaves de impurezas y puso aceite en las muescas para que entraran suavemente en las cerraduras. La última dificultad que quedaba por resolver era la de elegir el momento en que podía probar su experimento con el menor riesgo de ser interrumpida y descubierta. Sólo le quedaba esperar y dejarse guiar por los acontecimientos del día siguiente.

Por la mañana, los acontecimientos justificaron por primera vez en St. Crux la confianza que había depositado en ellos. ¡Por la mañana, la única dificultad que la tenía perpleja desapareció de repente gracias al almirante en persona! Toda la casa se sorprendió cuando el almirante anunció durante el desayuno que había dispuesto lo necesario para marcharse a Londres al cabo de una hora, que pasaría la noche en la ciudad y que volvería a St. Crux al día siguiente a tiempo para cenar. No dio más explicaciones al ama de llaves ni a nadie más, pero era fácil ver que la razón de su viaje a Londres tenía suma importancia para él. Engulló el desayuno con prisas y aguardó con impaciencia el carruaje antes de que éste se detuviera ante la puerta.

La experiencia había enseñado a Magdalen a ser cauta. Esperó un poco después de la partida del almirante Bartram antes de arriesgarse a probar el experimento con las llaves. Hizo bien. La señora Drake aprovechó la ausencia del almirante para revisar el estado de las habitaciones del primer piso. El resultado de su investigación no la satisfizo en absoluto, escobas y plumeros se aplicaron al trabajo y mientras duró la luz del día, no dejaron de entrar y salir criadas de las habitaciones.

Pasó la tarde y la oportunidad que aguardaba Magdalen no se presentó. Llegó de nuevo la hora de acostarse. Magdalen se vio en la disyuntiva de confiar en las dudosas posibilidades de la mañana siguiente o de probar audazmente las llaves en medio de la noche. En otros tiempos hubiera hecho su elección sin vacilar. Ahora vaciló, pero aún la sostenían los restos de su antiguo arrojo, y decidió probar de noche.

En St. Crux se acostaban temprano. Sería suficiente con que esperara en su dormitorio hasta las once y media. A esa hora bajó la escalera a hurtadillas con las llaves en el bolsillo y la bujía en la mano.

Al pasar por la entrada del corredor del segundo piso se detuvo y escuchó. No se oían ronquidos ni débil arrastrar de pies al otro lado del biombo. Se asomó y miró con desconfianza. El corredor de piedra estaba desierto y la cama baja con ruedas estaba vacía. Magdalen había visto con sus propios ojos al viejo Mazey dirigirse a los pisos superiores con una bujía en la mano, de eso hacía más de una hora. ¿Había aprovechado la ausencia de su amo para disfrutar del desacostumbrado placer de dormir en una habitación? Acababa de ocurrírsele esta idea cuando llegó a sus oídos un ruido desde el otro extremo del corredor. Magdalen avanzó hacía allí sigilosamente y oyó tras la puerta del último y más alejado de los dormitorios los fuertes ronquidos del veterano marino. Este descubrimiento resultaba sorprendente por más de un motivo. Aumentaba el impenetrable misterio de la cama con ruedas, pues demostraba a las claras que el viejo Mazey no tenía una incivilizada preferencia por pasar la noche en el corredor; dormía de aquella forma tan extraña e incómoda única y exclusivamente por el almirante.

No era el momento indicado para detenerse a pensar en lo que esta conclusión podía sugerir. Magdalen volvió sobre sus pasos por el corredor y bajó hasta el primer piso. Dejó atrás las habitaciones más cercanas y probó primero en la biblioteca. En la escalera y los corredores un miedo indecible había acelerado su pulso, pero la sensación de seguridad volvió cuando se encontró entre las cuatro paredes de la habitación y cerró la puerta al silencio fantasmal del corredor.

Probó primero la cerradura del cajón de la mesa. Ninguna de las llaves encajaba en ella. A continuación probó con el bargueño. ¿Fracasaría el segundo intento como el primero?

¡No! Una de las llaves encajaba. Tras hurgar un poco con paciencia, una de las llaves dio la vuelta a la cerradura. Magdalen examinó el interior con avidez. Había unos estantes arriba y un largo cajón debajo. Los estantes estaban llenos de ejemplares de minerales curiosos, pulcramente etiquetados y ordenados. El cajón se dividía en compartimentos. Dos de ellos contenían papeles. En el primero no descubrió más que una colección de facturas con sus recibos. En el segundo halló un montón de documentos, pero la letra, amarilleada por el tiempo, bastó para que comprendiera que el fideicomiso no estaba allí. Después de cerrar las puertas del bargueño con cierta dificultad, siguió probando llaves en los armaritos de las estanterías antes de proseguir sus investigaciones en el resto de los cuartos.

Los armaritos de las estanterías se resistieron a sus esfuerzos, igual que los cajones y armaritos de todas las demás habitaciones. Una tras otra, Magdalen probó pacientemente todas las cerraduras. Fue inútil. La posibilidad que le había ofrecido el bargueño de la biblioteca había sido la primera y la última.

Volvió a su dormitorio sin ver nada más que su propia sombra deslizándose ni oír nada más que sus propios pasos furtivos en el silencio de la medianoche. Tras guardar mecánicamente las llaves donde antes las había escondido, miró su cama y le dio la espalda con un escalofrío. El recuerdo de lo que había sufrido aquella mañana durante su paseo por el jardín seguía vividamente grabado en su cerebro. «Otra posibilidad que pruebo -pensó-, ¡y otra ocasión perdida! Me hundiré si pienso en ello, y pensaré en ello si me acuesto y me quedo despierta en la oscuridad.» Magdalen había llevado consigo un costurero a St. Crux como una de las pequeñas cosas que era deseable poseer en su papel de sirvienta; lo abrió ahora para aplicarse a la labor con resolución. Su falta de destreza con la aguja la ayudó en su objetivo obligándola a concentrarse en la tarea y alejando los pensamientos sobre los dos asuntos que ahora más temía: el futuro y ella misma.

Al día siguiente regresó el almirante tal como había previsto. Su visita a Londres no había mejorado su estado de ánimo. La sombra de una duda insuperable seguía entristeciendo su expresión; su lengua infatigable permaneció extrañamente quieta mientras Magdalen le servía su solitaria cena. Por la noche, los ronquidos volvieron a resonar con fuerza al otro lado del biombo; el viejo Mazey había vuelto a la incómoda cama con ruedas.

Pasaron tres días más. Llegó el mes de abril. El segundo día del mes, regresando tan inesperadamente como se había ido hacía una semana, el señor George Bartram reapareció en St. Crux.

Llegó a primera hora de la tarde y mantuvo una conversación con su tío en la biblioteca. Finalizada la entrevista, abandonó de nuevo la casa y el mozo de cuadra le llevó a la estación a tiempo de coger el último tren para Londres. Durante el camino, el mozo advirtió que «el señor George parecía más contento que otra cosa al abandonar St. Crux». También observó que, a su regreso, el almirante echaba pestes de su sobrino por haber agotado a los caballos, señal ésta de mal genio por parte de su amo que según él no tenía precedentes desde que le conocía. Magdalen había padecido de forma similar la irascibilidad del anciano con respecto a su trabajo. El almirante se había mostrado descontento con todo lo que hizo Magdalen en el comedor y había encontrado motivo de queja en todos los platos, uno tras otro, desde el caldo de cordero al queso tostado.

Los dos días siguientes transcurrieron según la rutina acostumbrada. Al tercero se produjo un incidente. Fue algo tan irrelevante en apariencia como que sonara la campanilla del salón. En realidad, fue el presagio de una catástrofe inminente, el terrible heraldo del fin.

Era tarea de Magdalen responder a la llamada de la campanilla. Llamó a la puerta del salón como de costumbre. No hubo respuesta. Tras llamar de nuevo con idéntico resultado, se aventuró a entrar en la habitación y al instante recibió en la cara una corriente de aire frío. La pesada puerta corredera del otro extremo estaba abierta y la atmósfera ártica de Hielahuesos se filtraba libremente en el salón vacío.

Magdalen aguardó cerca de la puerta, dudando sobre lo que debía hacer. Sin duda era la campanilla del salón la que había sonado y no otra. Aguardó mirando a través de la puerta abierta hacia la vastedad del salón de banquetes desmantelado.

Una breve reflexión la persuadió de que sería mejor volver abajo y esperar a que volviera a sonar la campanilla. Cuando se volvía para abandonar la habitación, miró hacia atrás por casualidad, y en ese preciso momento vio que se abría la puerta en el extremo opuesto del salón de banquetes, la puerta que conducía a la primera de las habitaciones del ala este. Salió por ella un hombre alto que llevaba gabán y sombrero y que se dirigió rápidamente hacia el salón. Sus andares lo traicionaron cuando aún se hallaba a medio camino. Magdalen reconoció al almirante.

Él pareció no sólo irritado, sino también sorprendido al encontrar a su camarera esperándole en el salón, e inquirió con tono áspero y suspicaz qué hacía allí. Magdalen respondió que había acudido al sonar la campanilla. La expresión del almirante se suavizó un poco al oír la explicación.

- Sí, sí, claro -dijo-. He llamado y luego lo he olvidado. -Deslizó la puerta corredera hasta cerrarla mientras hablaba-. Carbón -dijo con impaciencia, señalando el cubo vacío del carbón-. He llamado para pedir carbón.

Magdalen volvió a la planta baja. Comunicó la orden del almirante a la criada cuyo principal deber consistía en ocuparse de los fuegos y regresó a la despensa. Tras cerrar la puerta suavemente, se sentó para reflexionar a solas.

En el salón había tenido la impresión -impresión que perduraba- de que había sorprendido accidentalmente al almirante Bartram en una visita a las habitaciones del ala este que, por alguna razón conocida sólo por él, deseaba mantener en secreto. Obsesionada de noche y de día por la idea que dominaba todos sus actos y pensamientos, Magdalen salvó todas las dificultades lógicas de un salto y asoció de inmediato la sospecha de una secreta acción por parte del almirante con la sospecha similar que apuntaba hacia él como depositario del fideicomiso secreto. Hasta entonces, había creído firmemente que el almirante guardaba todos sus documentos importantes en alguna de la serie de habitaciones que habitaba en aquel momento. ¿Por qué no podía guardar algunos de ellos en otras habitaciones?, se preguntó ahora, recelando de la conclusión que hasta entonces le había parecido satisfactoria. El recuerdo de las llaves escondidas aún en su dormitorio hizo que aquel nuevo punto de vista le pareciera aún más razonable. Con una excepción poco importante, aquellas llaves no le habían servido en las habitaciones del ala norte de la casa. ¿No servirían para los bargueños y armaritos del ala este, que aún no había intentado abrir ni había pensado hacerlo? Valía la pena intentarlo si existía una posibilidad, por pequeña que fuera, de obtener mayor provecho de las llaves del que había obtenido hasta entonces. Si existía una posibilidad, aunque fuera remota, de que el fideicomiso estuviera escondido en alguno de los muebles con cerradura del ala este, tenía que ponerla a prueba. ¿Cuándo? La respuesta la dictó su propia experiencia. A la hora en que no hubiera ojos curiosos ni hubiera de temer accidentes. Cuando la casa estuviera silenciosa en medio de la noche.

Conocía demasiado bien su propia personalidad alterada y temía la influencia depresiva de una demora. Decidió correr el riesgo, temerariamente, esa misma noche.

Magdalen cometió más errores cuando sirvió la cena. Las críticas del almirante por su modo de servir la mesa fueron más severas que nunca, pero las palabras más duras no le causaban el menor dolor; en realidad apenas le oía, no pensaba en otra cosa más que en la prueba que se avecinaba. Las horas, que habían discurrido lentamente la noche de su primer experimento con las llaves, pasaron ahora con rapidez. Cuando llegó la hora de acostarse, la pilló por sorpresa.

En esta ocasión, Magdalen aguardó más tiempo. El almirante se hallaba en casa, podía cambiar de opinión y bajar de nuevo al primer piso después de haber subido a su dormitorio, podía haber olvidado algo en la biblioteca y quizá bajar a buscarlo. Dieron las doce en el reloj del corredor de los criados antes de que se arriesgara a salir de su dormitorio con las llaves de nuevo en el bolsillo y la bujía en la mano.

En el primer tramo de escaleras en el que puso el pie con gran vacilación, la asaltó de repente un indecible miedo a los peligros desconocidos. Se detuvo, razonando consigo misma. No se había echado atrás ante ningún sacrificio, no se había dejado dominar por el miedo al llevar a cabo la estratagema mediante la que había conseguido entrar en St. Crux y, ahora, cuando había vencido pacientemente la larga serie de dificultades iniciales, vacilaba. «No retrocedí ante nada para llegar hasta aquí -se dijo-. ¿Qué locura es esta que me hace retroceder ahora?»

Su pulso se aceleró con aquella idea y la vergüenza le dio ánimos para seguir. Bajó por las escaleras del tercero al segundo piso, y del segundo al primero, desconfiando de la cercanía de su dormitorio, por si se le ocurría arrepentirse. Un minuto después había llegado al final del corredor, había cruzado el vestíbulo y había entrado en el salón. Sólo cuando puso la mano en el pesado pomo de cobre amarillo de la puerta corredera, sólo en ese momento antes de abrir esa puerta, hizo una pausa para recobrar el aliento. El salón de banquetes se hallaba al otro lado del tabique de madera contra el que se apoyaba; su exaltada imaginación notaba ya el frío sepulcral rodeándola.

Corrió la puerta unos centímetros y se detuvo, momentáneamente alarmada. Cuando el almirante la había cerrado en su presencia ese mismo día, ella no había oído ningún ruido. Cuando el viejo Mazey la había abierto para mostrarle las habitaciones del ala este, ella no había oído ningún ruido. Ahora, en el silencio de la noche, notaba por primera vez que la puerta hacía un ruido sordo, parecido al de una ráfaga de viento.

Magdalen se recobró y empujó más la puerta metiéndola hasta la mitad en el hueco de la pared destinado a recibirla. Cruzó el umbral audazmente y se enfrentó con la visión nocturna del salón de banquetes.

La luna aparecía por el lado sur de la casa. Sus pálidos rayos se filtraban por las ventanas más cercanas, formando largas franjas de luz oblicua sobre el suelo de mármol. Las negras sombras de los frontones entre ventana y ventana, alternaban con esas franjas y acentuaban el débil reverbero del resplandor lunar sobre el suelo. Hacia el otro lado, el salón se diluía misteriosamente en la oscuridad. El techo era invisible. La profunda chimenea, la repisa saliente, la larga hilera de escenas de batallas colgadas por encima de ella, todo se lo había tragado la noche. Sólo se distinguía un objeto, además de las ventanas resplandecientes y el suelo listado por la claridad lunar. En medio de la última y más lejana franja de luz, se alzaba el trípode con sus delgadas patas negras, como un monstruo que la luna hubiera devuelto a la vida, un monstruo que se alzaba desde la luz para fundirse con las sombras del salón. En todas partes los sonidos habían muerto, ahogados en el frío estancado. La tranquilizadora quietud de la noche era espantosa. Los profundos abismos de oscuridad ocultaban abismos de silencio aún más inconmensurables.

Magdalen se quedó inmóvil en la puerta, forzó la vista y aguzó el oído. Miraba esperando ver aparecer algo que se moviera, escuchaba esperando oír algún ruido, y miró y escuchó en vano. Sentía escalofríos continuos. ¿Escalofríos de miedo o de frío? Con aquella duda recobró su resuelta voluntad. «¡Ahora o nunca! -pensó-. Contaré las franjas de luz tres veces y cruzaré el salón.»

- Una, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco. Una, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco. Una, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco.

Cuando el último número salió de sus labios por tercera vez, Magdalen atravesó el salón. Sin mirar ni escuchar nada, sosteniendo la bujía con una mano y la otra cogida maquinalmente a los pliegues de su vestido, deprisa recorrió como un fantasma aquel espectral lugar en toda su longitud. Llegó a la puerta de la primera de las habitaciones del ala este, la abrió y entró en ella corriendo. El súbito alivio de haber llegado a un refugio, la súbita entrada en una nueva atmósfera, la abrumaron momentáneamente. Tuvo el tiempo justo de dejar la bujía a salvo sobre una mesa antes de desplomarse, mareada y sin aliento, en la silla más cercana.

Poco a poco notó que el descanso la tranquilizaba. Al cabo de unos minutos fue consciente del triunfo que suponía haber conseguido llegar al ala este. Al cabo de unos

minutos, se sintió con fuerzas para levantarse, sacar las llaves del bolsillo e inspeccionar las inmediaciones.

Los primeros muebles que llamaron su atención fueron un antiguo escritorio de roble tallado y una pesada mesa de marquetería con un bargueño incorporado. Probó primero el escritorio: parecía, de los dos, el más probable para guardar papeles. Tres de las llaves tenían el tamaño adecuado para la cerradura, pero ninguna de ellas alcanzó a girar. El escritorio era inexpugnable. Magdalen se alejó de él e hizo una pausa para despabilar la mecha de la bujía antes de probar con el bargueño de marquetería.

En el momento en que extendía la mano hacia la bujía, un sonido estremeció de terror la quietud del salón de banquetes, un sonido débil y fugaz, como el de una distante ráfaga de viento.

La puerta corredera del salón se había movido.

¿Hacia dónde? ¿Había empujado la puerta una mano desconocida para acabar de abrirla... o había vuelto a cerrarla? El pavor a que un agente desconocido la dejara encerrada allí, impidiéndole volver a la parte habitada de la casa, fue mayor que el terror a asomar la cabeza al salón de banquetes. Desesperadamente se dirigió a la puerta de la habitación.

La puerta se había cerrado sola después de que ella entrara, pero Magdalen volvió a abrirla con facilidad, y miró.

La visión con que tropezaron sus ojos la dejó clavada en el suelo, presa del pánico.

Cerca de la primera ventana a contar desde el salón del ala norte, bañada por el resplandor lunar, vio una figura solitaria. La figura permanecía inmóvil, surgida de la franja de luz del suelo más alejada de Magdalen. Desapareció de pronto, mientras ella la miraba. Un instante después volvía a verla en la segunda franja de luz, la perdía de nuevo, la veía en la tercera franja, volvía a perderla, y la veía en la cuarta. Poco a poco avanzó, ora perdida misteriosamente en las sombras, ora súbitamente visible a la luz, hasta llegar a la quinta franja de luz de luna, la más cercana a Magdalen. Ahí se detuvo y se desvió poco a poco hacia el centro del salón. Se detuvo de nuevo al llegar al trípode, estremeciéndose de forma audible en medio del silencio, con ambas manos sobre las cenizas apagadas como si hubiera fuego para calentárselas. La figura volvió sobre sus pasos, avanzó por la senda de luz, se detuvo junto a la quinta ventana, se desvió de nuevo y se acercó silenciosamente a través de las sombras al lugar exacto en que se encontraba Magdalen.

Magdalen se quedó sin habla, sin voluntad. Todos sus sentidos menos el de la vista estaban paralizados. Su vista -fuertemente sujeta por las cadenas de su propio terror- miraba inmutable hacia delante. Magdalen se hallaba en el umbral de la puerta, cerrando el paso a la figura que avanzaba hacia ella entre las sombras.

La figura se acercó.

Las cadenas del terror que la sujetaban se partieron en mil pedazos cuando la figura llegó al alcance de su mano. Magdalen retrocedió. La luz de la bujía dio de lleno en el rostro de la figura, mostrándole... al almirante Bartram.

Iba envuelto en una larga bata gris. Tenía la cabeza descubierta y los pies descalzos. En la mano izquierda llevaba su pequeña cesta de llaves. El almirante pasó junto a ella despacio, moviendo los labios sin cesar y con los ojos muy abiertos y fijos, con la vidriosa mirada de la muerte. Aquellos ojos revelaron la verdad a Magdalen. Era sonámbulo.

El terror de verle de aquella manera no podía compararse al que había sentido al posar la vista sobre la aparición espectral en el salón bajo la luz de la luna. Esta vez Magdalen pudo dominarse, pudo sondear la profundidad de su propio miedo.

El almirante pasó junto a ella y se detuvo en el centro de la habitación. Magdalen se

acercó a él para oír lo que murmuraba para sí. Se aventuró aún más cerca y oyó el nombre de su difunto marido brotando claramente de los labios del sonámbulo.

- ¡Noel! -decía, con el tono bajo y monótono del que anda en sueños-. ¡Mi buen Noel, llévatela! Me angustia día y noche. No sé dónde puede estar a salvo. No sé dónde guardarla. ¡Llévatela, Noel, llévatela!

Mientras pronunciaba estas palabras, caminó hacia el bargueño de marquetería. Se sentó en la silla que había frente a él y buscó una llave entre las del cesto. Magdalen lo siguió sigilosamente y se colocó detrás de la silla esperando con la bujía en la mano. El almirante encontró la llave y abrió el bargueño. Abrió después un cajón, el segundo de una hilera, sin dudarlo un instante. El único contenido del cajón era una carta doblada. El almirante la sacó y la colocó ante él sobre la mesa.

- ¡Llévatela, Noel! -repitió, mecánicamente-. ¡Llévatela!

Magdalen miró por encima de su hombro y leyó las siguientes líneas, escritas con la letra de su marido, sobre la parte superior de la carta: «Para guardar en su poder y ser abierta sólo por usted el día de mi fallecimiento. Noel Vanstone». Vio las palabras claramente, con el nombre y la dirección del almirante escritos debajo.

¡El fideicomiso al alcance de su mano! ¡El fideicomiso hallado por fin en su escondite!

Magdalen dio un paso hacia delante con la intención de esquivar la silla con sigilo y arrebatar la carta de la mesa. En el instante en que se movió, el almirante cogió la carta, cerró el bargueño, se levantó, dio media vuelta y se plantó frente a ella.

Guiada por un primer impulso, Magdalen extendió la mano hacia la carta que el almirante sostenía en el aire. La luz amarillenta de la bujía le daba de lleno. La espantosa muerte en vida de su rostro, el misterio del cuerpo dormido, moviéndose para obedecer inconscientemente a la mente que soñaba, la intimidaron; la mano le tembló y la dejó caer de nuevo al costado.

El almirante devolvió a la cesta la llave del bargueño y cruzó la habitación en dirección al escritorio, con la cesta en una mano y la carta en la otra. Magdalen volvió a dejar la bujía sobre la mesa y lo contempló. El sonámbulo abrió el escritorio del mismo modo que antes había abierto el bargueño. Una vez más, Magdalen extendió la mano y una vez más retrocedió ante el misterio y el terror del sueño del almirante, que metió la carta en un cajón en el fondo del escritorio y volvió a cerrar la pesada tapa de roble.

- Sí -dijo-. Está más segura ahí, como tú dices, Noel. Está más segura ahí. -Ésas fueron sus palabras. Así, de vez en cuando, sus palabras le traicionaban, revelando al hombre muerto que vivía y hablaba de nuevo en el sueño.

¿Había cerrado con llave el escritorio? Magdalen no había oído dar la vuelta a la llave. Cuando el almirante se alejó caminando de nuevo hacia el centro de la habitación, Magdalen intentó abrir la tapa. Estaba cerrada con llave. Hecho esto, se dio la vuelta para ver qué hacía el sonámbulo: estaba saliendo de la habitación con la cesta de llaves en la mano. Cuando los ojos de Magdalen se posaron sobre él, cruzaba el umbral de la puerta.

Una inescrutable fascinación se adueñó de ella, una misteriosa atracción hizo que lo siguiera a su pesar. Cogió la bujía y siguió al almirante como una autómata, como si también ella fuera sonámbula. Una detrás del otro, avanzando lentamente y sin ruido, atravesaron el salón de banquetes. Una detrás del otro pasaron por el salón, caminaron por el corredor y subieron por las escaleras. Magdalen le siguió hasta su dormitorio. Una vez allí, entró y cerró la puerta con suavidad. Ella se detuvo y miró la cama baja con ruedas. La habían apartado un poco de la puerta por el lado de los pies. ¿Quién la había movido? Magdalen acercó la bujía y miró hacia la almohada con súbita curiosidad y recelo.

La cama con ruedas estaba vacía.

Este descubrimiento la sobresaltó sólo un momento. Pese a la lógica de las conclusiones que podían deducirse de aquel hecho, Magdalen no llegó a deducirlas. Su espíritu recobraba lentamente el uso de sus facultades mentales, afectado aún por las impresiones más profundas que había experimentado hacía un momento. Siguió al almirante al interior de su dormitorio como antes lo había seguido por el salón de banquetes.

¿Había vuelto a acostarse? ¿Dormía aún? Magdalen escuchó junto a la puerta. No se oía el menor sonido en el interior del cuarto. Probó a abrir la puerta y, viendo que no la habían cerrado, la abrió con suavidad unos centímetros para escuchar de nuevo. Los altibajos de la respiración profunda y regular del almirante llegaron inmediatamente a sus oídos. Aún dormía.

Magdalen entró en la habitación y se acercó a la cama donde vio al almirante, haciendo pantalla con la mano para tapar la bujía. El sueño del sonámbulo había pasado; el anciano se había sumido ahora en un sueño profundo y pacífico; sus labios estaban inmóviles, su mano yacía sobre el cubrecama en absoluto reposo. Tenía el rostro vuelto hacia el lado derecho de la cama. Ahí tenía una mesita al alcance de la mano. Cuatro objetos había sobre ella: la bujía, las cerillas, la limonada que solía beber todas las noches y su cesta de llaves.

La idea de apoderarse de las llaves aquella noche (si se le presentaba una oportunidad cuando el almirante no tuviera la cesta en las manos) había cruzado sus pensamientos por primera vez al verlo entrar en su dormitorio. La había abandonado, de momento, con la sorpresa de descubrir que la cama con ruedas estaba vacía. La recuperó en el instante en que la mesita atrajo su atención. Era inútil perder tiempo en buscar una llave entre las otras, no estaba familiarizada con ella y no podría identificarla fácilmente. Cogió, pues, todas las llaves con su cesta y cerró la puerta sin ruido cuando salió de la habitación.

La cama con ruedas volvió a atraer su interés al encontrarla en su camino y le obligó a pensar en ella. Tras una breve reflexión, empujó el pie de la cama hasta su posición habitual, atravesada contra la puerta. Tanto si el veterano marino se hallaba en la casa como si no, podía regresar al puesto del que había desertado en cualquier momento. Si veía que la cama no estaba en su lugar habitual podía sospechar que ocurría algo raro, podía despertar a su amo y podía descubrirse que faltaban las llaves.

No ocurrió nada cuando bajó por las escaleras; no ocurrió nada cuando avanzó por el corredor. La casa estaba tan silenciosa y solitaria como siempre. Atravesó el salón de banquetes, esta vez sin vacilar; los acontecimientos de la noche habían reforzado su ánimo contra terrores imaginarios. «¡Ya es mía!», susurró para sí en un incontenible estallido de júbilo cuando entró en la primera de las habitaciones del ala este y depositó la bujía sobre el viejo escritorio.

Aun entonces, su paciencia hubo de ponerse nuevamente a prueba. Pasaron unos minutos, que parecieron horas, antes de que diera con la correspondiente llave y alzara la tapa del escritorio. ¡Por fin abrió el cajón interior! ¡Por fin tenía la carta en la mano!

La carta había sido sellada en su momento, pero el sello estaba roto. Magdalen la abrió de inmediato para cerciorarse de que se hallaba efectivamente en posesión del fideicomiso antes de abandonar la habitación. Lo primero que apareció ante sus ojos fue el final de la carta. Terminaba al principio de la tercera hoja y la firmaba Noel Vanstone. Bajo ese nombre había el siguiente añadido con la letra del almirante:

Recibí esta carta al mismo tiempo que el testamento de mi amigo, Noel Vanstone. En caso de que yo muera sin dejar otras instrucciones al respecto, ruego a mi sobrino y a mis albaceas que comprendan que me considero absolutamente obligado a cumplir lo que se me pide en este documento.

ARTHUR EVERARD BARTRAM.

Magdalen no leyó estas líneas. Se limitó a observar que no estaban escritas con la letra de Noel Vanstone y, pasándolas por alto porque carecían de importancia para sus fines, volvió las hojas de la carta y concentró toda su atención en las frases que iniciaban la primera página.

Esto es lo que leyó:

Querido almirante Bartram:

Cuando abra usted mi testamento (en el que se le nombra mi único albacea), descubrirá que también le he nombrado a usted heredero universal de todos mis bienes tras el pago de un legado de cinco mil libras. El propósito de esta carta es comunicarle confidencialmente el objetivo con el que he depositado mi fortuna en sus manos.

Le ruego que tome nota de que es mi intención que entregue este gran legado…

Hasta ahí había llegado con curiosidad e interés, conteniendo el aliento; entonces perdió la concentración. Algo -estaba demasiado absorta en la lectura para saber qué- se había interpuesto entre la carta y ella. ¿Era un nuevo sonido en el salón de banquetes? Miró por encima del hombro hacia la puerta que quedaba a su espalda y escuchó. No oyó nada, no vio nada. Volvió a enfrascarse en la carta. La letra era apretada. Su impaciencia por leer más le jugó una mala pasada y no encontró el punto donde la había dejado. Sus ojos, atraídos por un borrón, se posaron sobre una frase posterior a la que había dejado inconclusa. Las primeras tres palabras que vio captaron de nuevo su atención; eran las primeras palabras que veía en la carta referidas a George Bartram. Excitada por este hallazgo, continuó leyendo ávidamente antes de hacer un segundo intento por recuperar el punto perdido:

Si su sobrino no cumple estas condiciones, es decir, si siendo soltero o viudo en el momento de mi fallecimiento, no se casa siguiendo al pie de la letra mis instrucciones dentro de los seis meses civiles siguientes, es mi deseo que no reciba…

Había leído hasta esa palabra, hasta esa palabra y no más, cuando una mano llegó por detrás de ella, interponiéndose entre la carta y sus ojos, y la agarró por la muñeca con fuerza.

Magdalen se dio la vuelta con un chillido de terror y se encontró cara a cara con el viejo Mazey.

El veterano marino tenía los ojos inyectados en sangre, su mano era robusta, llevaba torcidas las zapatillas a rayas y su cuerpo se balanceaba de un lado a otro, apoyado en las piernas bien abiertas. Si aquella noche hubiera puesto a prueba su estado mediante el infalible criterio de su barco en miniatura, la sentencia habría sido inevitablemente la habitual: «Otra vez borracho, Mazey, otra vez borracho».

- ¡Tú, joven Jezabel! -dijo el viejo lobo de mar, con una mirada maliciosa en un lado del rostro y ceñudo en el otro-. La próxima vez que te des un paseíto nocturno por los alrededores de Hielahuesos, utiliza primero esos penetrantes ojos que tienes y asegúrate de que no hay nadie más paseándose por el jardín. ¡Suelta eso, Jezabel, suéltalo!

Sujetando fuertemente el brazo de Magdalen con una mano, le arrebató la carta con la otra, la metió de nuevo en el cajón abierto y cerró el escritorio. Magdalen no se resistió, no dijo nada. Había perdido toda su energía, su poder de resistencia estaba agotado. Los terrores de aquella horrible noche, encadenados unos a otros en una ininterrumpida sucesión de conmociones, habían conseguido por fin que se derrumbara. Se rindió con una sumisión y tembló con un desvalimiento como si fuera la mujer más débil del mundo.

El viejo Mazey le soltó el brazo y señaló con solemnidad ebria una silla en un rincón de la habitación. Magdalen se sentó sin pronunciar una sola palabra. El veterano (que resollaba con fuerza) se apoyó con ambos codos en la tapa oblicua del escritorio y desde esta posición de mando se dirigió a Magdalen una vez más.

- ¡Ven, que voy a encerrarte! -dijo, meneando la venerable cabeza con severidad judicial-. Mañana por la mañana habrá una comisión investigadora, y yo soy testigo, ¡mala suerte!, yo soy testigo. Has cometido un robo, mala pécora, eso es lo que has hecho. Las llaves de su señoría el almirante, robadas; el escritorio de su señoría el almirante, saqueado; y las cartas personales de su señoría el almirante, abiertas. ¡Robo! ¡Robo! ¡Ven, que voy a encerrarte! -Se irguió lentamente con la ayuda de ambas manos, asistido por la sólida resistencia del escritorio, e inició un lacrimoso soliloquio-. ¿Quién lo hubiera pensado? -dijo el viejo Mazey paternalmente, con los ojos llorosos-. Si la miras por fuera, es recta como un álamo; mírala por dentro, y es tan retorcida como el pecado. Y tan buena moza que es. ¡Qué lástima!, ¡qué lástima!

- ¡No me haga daño! -dijo Magdalen con un hilo de voz cuando el viejo Mazey- se acercó tambaleándose y volvió a agarrarla por la muñeca-. Estoy asustada, señor Mazey, estoy horriblemente asustada.

- ¿Daño? -repitió el veterano marino-. Demasiado apego te tengo para hacerte daño, ¡qué vergüenza, a mi edad! ¿Si te suelto la muñeca caminarás delante de mí, donde yo pueda verte? ¿Serás una buena chica y caminarás derecha hasta tu dormitorio?

Magdalen prometió lo que le pedía con el sincero anhelo de refugiarse en su habitación. Se levantó e intentó coger la bujía del escritorio, pero la astuta mano del viejo Mazey fue más rápida.

- Deja ahí la bujía -dijo el veterano, olvidando por un momento su posición de responsabilidad para guiñarle un ojo-. Tienes las piernas un poco más veloces que yo, querida, y podrías dejarme en la oscuridad si no llevo yo la luz.

Regresaron a la parte habitada de la casa. Tambaleándose detrás de Magdalen, con la cesta de llaves en una mano y la bujía en la otra, el viejo Mazey comparó, pesaroso, la figura de la muchacha con la rectitud del álamo y su carácter con la sinuosidad del pecado durante todo el camino de vuelta a través de Hielahuesos y por las escaleras hasta su dormitorio. Llegados a su destino, se negó tajantemente a darle la bujía hasta haberla visto a buen recaudo dentro de la habitación. Cuando se cumplió esta condición, entregó la vela con una mano y con un rápido movimiento de la otra sacó la llave de la cerradura por la parte interior y cerró la puerta. Magdalen le oyó reír entre dientes felicitándose por su destreza, y oyó cómo metía la llave en la cerradura con infinita dificultad. Por fin consiguió cerrar con un profundo gruñido de alivio.

- ¡Ahí está bien segura! -oyó Magdalen que decía volviendo a su apesadumbrado soliloquio-. Una buena moza como he visto pocas. ¡Qué lástima!, ¡qué lástima!

Los últimos sonidos de su voz se apagaron en la distancia y Magdalen se quedó sola en su habitación.

El viejo Mazey bajó al corredor del segundo piso, donde quedaba siempre una luz encendida durante la noche, cogiéndose fuerte a la barandilla. Se dirigió a la cama baja con ruedas y, apoyándose en la pared opuesta, la contempló con atención. La prolongada contemplación del lugar donde pasaba la noche no pareció contentarle.

Sacudió la cabeza ominosamente y, sacando unas viejas zapatillas remendadas del bolsillo de su gabán, las examinó con aire de duda infinita.

- No doy en el blanco esta noche -masculló-. Estoy hecho un lío, eso es lo que pasa, estoy hecho un lío.

Daba la casualidad de que las viejas zapatillas remendadas y la confusión del veterano marino se asociaban íntimamente en una relación causa efecto. Las zapatillas pertenecían al almirante, que se había encaprichado irracionalmente, como en tantas otras cosas, de aquel par en particular, y que seguía insistiendo en llevarlas pese a que hacía ya tiempo que habían quedado fuera de servicio. A primera hora de la tarde, el viejo Mazey había llevado las zapatillas al remendón de la aldea para que las arreglara al momento y tenerlas preparadas cuando su amo las pidiera a la mañana siguiente. El viejo lobo de mar se había quedado supervisando el trabajo hasta la caída de la tarde y luego el zapatero y él se fueron a la posada de la aldea para beber a la salud de cada uno antes de despedirse. Esta ceremonia social se había prolongado hasta bien entrada la noche y, como consecuencia natural, se habían separado en un estado de total embriaguez por ambas partes.

Si la borrachera no hubiera tenido más resultado que aquel paseo por los jardines de St. Crux durante el cual el viejo Mazey había visto luz en las ventanas del ala este, sin duda a la mañana siguiente la habría recordado como uno de los logros más dignos de encomio de toda su vida. Pero de ella se había derivado otra consecuencia que el viejo lobo de mar veía ahora de manera borrosa a causa del estado de desconcierto en que el alcohol había dejado su cerebro. Había cometido una falta de disciplina y de confianza. En pocas palabras, había desertado de su puesto.

La única salvaguarda que protegía al almirante Bartram de su propia tendencia constitucional al sonambulismo era la guardia que mantenía su viejo y fiel sirviente ante la puerta. De nada habían servido las súplicas para que el almirante se sometiera a la precaución habitual en casos como el suyo. El almirante se negaba tajantemente a que lo encerraran en su habitación; se negaba incluso a admitir su tendencia a andar dormido siempre que tenía algún sueño perturbador. Una y otra vez se había despertado el viejo Mazey a causa de los repetidos intentos del anciano por apartar la cama con ruedas o pasar por encima de ella estando dormido, y una y otra vez el amo se había negado a creer al veterano marino cuando éste le había informado por la mañana. Estos incidentes del pasado acudieron confusamente a la memoria del viejo lobo de mar mientras miraba la puerta del dormitorio con expresión de alelada sorpresa, obligándole a plantearse la seria pregunta de si el almirante había abandonado su habitación aquella noche. Si por desgracia había padecido un ataque de sonambulismo, las zapatillas que el viejo Mazey tenía en la mano apuntaban directamente a la conclusión de que su amo debía de haberse paseado descalzo y en la fría noche por las escaleras y corredores de piedra de St. Crux.

- ¡Quiera Dios que no se haya movido! -musitó el viejo Mazey, sobrecogido por la mera idea, a pesar de su audacia y de que estaba borracho-. ¡Si su señoría ha estado paseando esta noche, será su muerte!

Obligado por una fuerza mayor, constante en su fidelidad perruna hacia el almirante, ya que no en otra cosa, el viejo Mazey se esforzó por sacudirse de encima el embotamiento causado por la bebida. Examinó la cama con la mirada más clara y la cabeza más despejada. La precaución tomada por Magdalen de volverla a poner en su posición habitual la presentaba necesariamente a los ojos del viejo Mazey como una cama que no había sido desplazada en ningún momento. A continuación examinó la colcha. No vio el más leve vestigio de las hendiduras que habrían dejado necesariamente unos pies si hubieran pasado por encima de ella. Ante él tenía pruebas evidentes, las únicas que podían reconocer sus desconcertados ojos, de que el almirante no se había movido de la habitación.

- ¡Mañana haré la promesa de no volver a beber! -masculló el viejo Mazey en un arranque de agradecido alivio. En seguida los vapores etílicos volvieron a envolver insidiosamente su cerebro y el veterano marino retomó su acostumbrado remedio y se

paseó por el corredor en zigzag haciendo guardia sobre la cubierta de un barco imaginario.

Poco después de la salida del sol, Magdalen oyó de repente el ruido de la llave en la cerradura. La puerta se abrió y el viejo Mazey reapareció en el umbral. Tras varias horas, la fiebre de la embriaguez se había enfriado hasta convertirse en un leve rubor penitente. Resollaba con más fuerza que nunca en una sucesión de roncos gruñidos y meneaba la venerable cabeza sin cesar, pensando en sus propias faltas.

- ¿Qué tal estás ahora, mi joven tiburón terrestre con enaguas? -preguntó el viejo marino-. ¿Te ha dejado dormir tu conciencia?

- No he dormido -dijo Magdalen, y se apartó de él, pues temía lo que pudiera hacerle-. No recuerdo lo que ocurrió después de que usted cerrara la puerta. Creo que debí de desmayarme. ¡No me asuste otra vez, señor Mazey! Me siento terriblemente débil y enferma. ¿Qué quiere?

- Quiero decirte algo muy serio -respondió el viejo Mazey con inescrutable solemnidad-. Hace más de una hora que estoy pensando en venir aquí y soltarlo todo. Fíjate en lo que te digo, jovencita. Voy a deshonrarme a mí mismo.

Magdalen retrocedió más y más mirándolo con alarma creciente.

- Sé cuál es mi deber hacia su señoría el almirante -prosiguió el viejo Mazey, señalando tristemente con la mano en dirección al dormitorio de su amo-. Pero por mucho que lo intente, no tengo valor para prestar testimonio contra ti, mala pécora. Me gustaron tus formas (sobre todo la cintura) desde que entraste en esta casa y no puedo evitar que sigan gustándome, aunque hayas cometido un robo y aunque seas más retorcida que el pecado. He mirado con indulgencia a las buenas mozas que se han cruzado en mi vida, y es demasiado tarde ahora para mirarlas con severidad. Tengo setenta y siete o setenta y ocho años, no lo sé bien. Soy un viejo casco abollado con las junturas abiertas y las bombas atascadas, y las aguas de la Muerte entran a toda presión. Soy un miserable pecador como cualquiera de los que encontrara por estos lares, con la excepción de Thomas Nagle, el zapatero remendón, que es peor que yo, porque es el más joven de los dos y debería ser más sensato. Pero en resumidas cuentas, la cuestión es que me iré a la tumba mirando con indulgencia a las buenas mozas. ¡Una vergüenza, joven Jezabel, una verdadera vergüenza!

A su pesar, los ingobernables ojos del veterano marino volvieron a lanzar destellos de malicia mientras concluía su arenga; las últimas reservas de austeridad abandonaron su rostro y se atrincheraron, consternadas alrededor de las comisuras de la boca. Magdalen volvió a acercarse a él e intentó hablar. Con solemnidad, el viejo Mazey le indicó que se alejara moviendo de nuevo tristemente la mano.

- ¡Nada de engatusarme con palabras! -dijo el viejo Mazey-. Ya soy bastante malo sin necesidad de eso. Tengo el deber de informar a su señoría el almirante y lo haré. Pero si quieres escabullirte antes de que informe del robo y de que empiece la comisión de investigación, cometeré la deshonra de dejarte marchar. Hoy es día de mercado en Ossory y Dawkes se irá hasta allí en carro dentro de un cuarto de hora. Dawkes te llevará si se lo pido. Sé cuál es mi deber: mi deber es encerrarte bajo llave y ver a Dawkes en el Infierno antes que pedirle que te lleve. Pero no tengo valor para ser duro con una buena moza como tú. Se lleva en la sangre y no se puede arrancar de la piel. ¡Una vergüenza, te digo, una auténtica vergüenza!

Esta propuesta, ofrecida de forma tan extraña y repentina, cogió a Magdalen totalmente por sorpresa. Los acontecimientos de la víspera la habían trastornado hasta el punto de no ser capaz de decidir nada en tan breve plazo.

- Es usted muy bueno conmigo, señor Mazey -dijo-. ¿Podría quedarme un minuto a solas para pensarlo?

- Sí -respondió el viejo lobo de mar. Dio media vuelta en el acto y salió de la habitación. «Todas son iguales -prosiguió el viejo Mazey, pensando aún en el sexo opuesto-. Les ofrezcas lo que les ofrezcas, siempre quieren algo más. Altas y bajas, nativas y extranjeras, novias y esposas, ¡todas son iguales!»

Una vez a solas, Magdalen tomó su decisión con menos dificultad de lo que había previsto.

Si se quedaba en la casa, sólo tenía dos caminos ante sí: acusar al viejo Mazey de hablar bajo los efectos de una alucinación de borracho o someterse a las circunstancias. Aunque el viejo marino era culpable de su derrota cuando acariciaba ya el triunfo, la consideración que le había mostrado hacía imposible la idea de defenderse a su costa, aun suponiendo, lo que era altamente improbable, que esa defensa fuera creída. Del segundo de los dos casos (el sometimiento a las circunstancias), no cabía esperar más que un resultado: el despido inmediato, y quizá el desenmascaramiento. ¿Qué ganaría ella arrostrando semejante humillación, abandonando la casa públicamente deshonrada a los ojos de las criadas que la habían detestado y habían recelado de ella desde el principio? El accidente que había arrebatado literalmente el fideicomiso de sus manos era irreparable. La única compensación aparente de aquel desastre, en otras palabras, el descubrimiento de que el fideicomiso existía en realidad y de que el matrimonio de George Bartram en un determinado plazo de tiempo era uno de sus contenidos, tenía un valor que sólo podría medirse cuando lo sometiera a la experiencia del señor Loscombe. Cuantos motivos podían ocurrírsele, la instaban a abandonar la casa clandestinamente mientras tuviera esa oportunidad. Se asomó al corredor y llamó al señor Mazey en voz baja.

- Acepto su oferta con agradecimiento, señor Mazey -le dijo-. No imagina usted hasta qué punto fue dura la medida que tomó conmigo al arrancarme aquella carta de la mano. Pero cumplía usted con su deber, y le agradezco que me salve esta mañana, por duro que fuera conmigo anoche. No soy tan mala como usted cree, se lo aseguro.

El viejo Mazey desechó el tema volviendo a agitar con tristeza la mano.

- ¡Dejémoslo! -dijo el veterano marino-. ¡Dejémoslo! No tiene importancia para un viejo granuja como yo, muchacha. Aunque fueras cincuenta veces peor de lo que eres, te dejaría marchar. Ponte el chal y el sombrero y ven conmigo. Soy una vergüenza para mí mismo y una advertencia para los demás, eso es lo que soy. ¡Nada de equipaje, ojo! Deja aquí todos tus trapos para que los registren, si es necesario, a discreción de su señoría el almirante. Con tu equipaje puedo ser duro, joven Jezabel, ya que no lo soy contigo.

El viejo Mazey abandonó la habitación seguido de Magdalen. «Cuanto menos la vea, mejor, sobre todo la cintura», se dijo, mientras bajaba cojeando y apoyándose en la barandilla.

El carro se hallaba en el patio de atrás cuando llegaron a la planta baja; Dawkes (que era el criado del administrador de la granja) ajustaba en aquel momento la última hebilla del arnés del caballo. La blanca escarcha era aún visible en la penumbra y las gotas centelleaban sobre el largo pelaje de *Brutus* y *Cassius*, que vagaban por el patio, echando vaho por la boca y moviendo lentamente el rabo a la espera de que partiese el carro. El viejo Mazey se acercó a Dawkes solo y ejerció su influencia sobre el criado, que, mirándola con imperturbable asombro, colocó un cojín de cuero sobre el asiento del carro para su compañera de viaje. Magdalen aguardó, aterida de frío, mientras se completaban los preparativos para la partida, sin reparar en nada más que en la vertiginosa confusión de sus pensamientos y la impotente paralización de sus emociones. Los acontecimientos de la noche se entremezclaban de un modo espantoso con las triviales circunstancias que se desarrollaban ante sus ojos en el patio. Magdalen se sobresaltó, con el mismo y súbito terror de la noche, cuando el viejo Mazey fue en su busca. Tembló con la misma desamparada confusión de la noche cuando el veterano marino posó su indulgente mirada sobre ella por última vez y le dio un beso en la mejilla al despedirse. Inmediatamente, notó que la ayudaba a subir al carro y que le daba una palmada en la espalda. En seguida le oyó decirle en un susurro confidencial que, sentada o de pie, seguía siendo recta como un álamo. Después hubo una pausa en la

que no se dijo ni se hizo nada, y luego el conductor del carro tomó las riendas y se encaramó a su sitio.

Magdalen se reanimó en el momento de la partida y miró hacia atrás. Lo último que vio de St. Crux fue al viejo Mazey meneando la cabeza en el patio con sus compañeros de disipación, los perros, siguiendo sus movimientos con el rabo. Las últimas palabras que oyó fueron las que dijo el viejo lobo de mar para rendir su tributo de despedida a los encantos de Magdalen.

- Con robo o sin él -dijo el viejo Mazey-, es una buena moza como hay pocas. ¡Qué pena!, ¡qué pena!

FIN DE LA SÉPTIMA ESCENA

ENTREACTO

DESARROLLO DE LA HISTORIA A TRAVÉS DEL CORREO

I

DE GEORGE BARTRAM AL ALMIRANTE BARTRAM

Londres, 3 de abril de 1848

Mi querido tío:

Unas breves líneas para informarle de un obstáculo temporal que ninguno de los dos había previsto cuando nos despedimos en St. Crux. Mientras desperdiciaba los últimos días de la semana en la Grange, los Tyrrel debían estar haciendo los preparativos para abandonar Londres. Acabo de volver de Portland Place. La casa está cerrada y la familia (incluyendo a la señorita Vanstone, por supuesto) abandonó ayer Inglaterra para pasar la temporada en París.

Por favor, no se deje inquietar por este pequeño revés inicial. Carece totalmente de importancia. Tengo la dirección del lugar en el que viven los Tyrrel y me dispongo a cruzar el Canal con el barco correo de esta noche. Hallaré mi oportunidad en París de la misma forma que la hubiera hallado en Londres. No la dejaré pasar, se lo prometo. Por una vez en la vida, cogí la ocasión por los pelos con tanta fuerza como si fuera el hombre más impetuoso de Inglaterra; en cuanto sepa el resultado, puede contar con que también usted lo sabrá.

Un saludo afectuoso de,

GEORGE BARTRAM

II

DE GEORGE BARTRAM A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

París, 13 de abril

Querida señorita Garth:

Acabo de escribir a mi tío con el corazón acongojado y creo que debo escribirle a usted en atención al amable interés que ha demostrado por mí.

Estoy seguro de que lamentará mi decepción cuando le diga con la mayor brevedad y claridad posibles que la señorita Vanstone me ha rechazado.

Puede que mi vanidad me engañara lastimosamente, pero confieso que esperaba una respuesta muy distinta. Puede que mi vanidad siga engañándome, pues le confieso, en confianza, que creo que la señorita Vanstone me rechazó con pesar. La razón que me dio para su decisión, que sin duda ella considera suficiente, a mí no me lo pareció entonces ni me lo parece ahora. Me habló del modo más dulce y amable, pero declaró con firmeza que «sus desgracias familiares» no le dejaban más alternativa honorable que pensar en mis propios intereses, ya que yo no lo hacía, y rechazar mi propuesta, aunque llena de agradecimiento.

La vi en tan tremenda agitación que no osé defender mi causa como hubiera hecho en otras circunstancias. A mi primer intento por abordar la cuestión personal, me suplicó que tuviera piedad de ella y bruscamente abandonó la habitación. Sigo ignorando si debo interpretar que esas «desgracias familiares» que se han interpuesto entre nosotros se refieren a la desgracia de la que sólo a sus padres se puede culpar o a la de tener una hermana como la señora de Noel Vanstone. Sea cual sea la circunstancia que se haya constituido en obstáculo, de ninguna manera lo es para mí. ¿No habrá nada que lo venza? ¿No hay esperanzas? Perdóneme por hacerle estas preguntas. No soporto esta amarga decepción. Ni ella, ni usted, nadie más que yo sabe hasta qué punto la amo.

Le saluda atentamente,

P. D. Partiré en dirección a Inglaterra dentro de uno o dos días y pasaré por Londres de camino a St. Crux. Existen razones familiares relacionadas con el odioso asunto del dinero que me hacen esperar la entrevista con mi tío con nulo entusiasmo. Si me escribe a Long's Hotel, su carta no hallará dificultad en encontrarme.

III

DE LA SEÑORITA GARTH A GEORGE BARTRAM

Westmoreland House, 16 de abril

Querido señor Bartram:

Estaba usted en lo cierto al suponer que su carta sería para mí motivo de aflicción. Si hubiera supuesto, además, que me causaría un gran enojo, no se habría alejado de la verdad. No soporto el orgullo y la obstinación de las jóvenes de hoy en día.

He recibido noticias de Norah. Es una larga carta en la que me da todo tipo de detalles. Me dispongo ahora a depositar toda mi confianza en el honor y la discreción de usted. Por su bien y por el de Norah voy a decirle cuáles son en realidad los escrúpulos que erróneamente la han llevado al orgullo y el desatino de rechazarle. Soy lo bastante mayor para hablar sin tapujos y puedo decirle que, si Norah hubiera sido lo bastante sensata para dejarse guiar por sus propios sentimientos, habría dicho que sí de todo corazón.

La causa original de todo este disparate se halla nada menos que en la persona de su respetable tío, el almirante Bartram.

Según parece, al almirante se le metió en la cabeza (supongo que en ausencia de usted) la idea de ir a Londres en persona y satisfacer su curiosidad con respecto a Norah, para lo cual visitó Portland Place con la excusa de renovar su vieja amistad con los Tyrrel. Llegó a la hora del almuerzo, vio a Norah y, por lo que tengo entendido, le gustó más de lo que esperaba o deseaba cuando entró en la casa.

Hasta aquí no he hecho más que especular, pero desgraciadamente es un hecho cierto que el almirante y la señora Tyrrel charlaron a solas cuando terminó el almuerzo. El nombre de usted no se mencionó, pero cuando la conversación recayó en Norah, usted estaba en el pensamiento de ambos, por supuesto. El almirante (reconociendo todos los méritos de Norah) manifestó compadecerla de todo corazón por su triste suerte. La escandalosa conducta de su hermana habría de interponerse siempre (dijo temer) entre ella y su bienestar futuro. ¿Quién podría casarse con ella sin poner primero como condición que ella y su hermana fueran como extrañas la una para la otra? E incluso así, seguiría existiendo la objeción -la grave objeción para la familia del marido- de emparentarse por matrimonio con una mujer como la señora de Noel Vanstone. Era muy triste, la pobre no tenía la culpa, pero no era menos cierto que su hermana constituiría un escollo permanente en su vida. Así continuó, sin una auténtica animosidad hacia Norah, pero con una obstinada convicción en sus prejuicios que tenía toda la apariencia de animosidad, y que otras personas con más genio que sentido común habrían considerado inmediatamente un insulto.

Por desgracia, la señora Tyrrel es de esta condición. Es una excelente persona, con un gran corazón, pero de genio vivo y corto entendimiento; ella siente un gran afecto por Norah y está sinceramente interesada en su bienestar. Por lo que he podido saber, manifestó, delante de él en primer lugar, que la opinión del almirante era interesada y egoísta en grado sumo; luego, a sus espaldas, la interpretó como una indirecta para que desalentáramos las visitas de su sobrino, lo cual representaba un insulto directo a una señora en su propia casa. Por si todo esto fuera poco, peores disparates habían de producirse aún.

Tan pronto como se fue su tío, la señora Tyrrel cometió la insensatez de mandar llamar a Norah y repetirle la conversación que acababa de tener con el almirante, previniéndola de la reacción que podía esperar del hombre que ocupaba el lugar de un padre para usted si aceptaba una propuesta de matrimonio de su parte. Cuando le diga

que el cariño leal de Norah hacia su hermana permanece invariable y que bajo su noble sumisión a las desdichadas circunstancias de la vida yace un orgullo susceptible a desaires de todo tipo, orgullo profundamente enraizado en su naturaleza, comprenderá usted el auténtico motivo del rechazo que tan justamente le ha decepcionado. Los tres son culpables por igual en este asunto. El tío de usted hizo mal en expresar sus reparos de forma tan directa y desconsiderada. La señora Tyrrel hizo mal en dejarse llevar por su temperamento y suponerse insultada cuando no había tal insulto. Y Norah hizo mal en anteponer el orgullo y una fe desesperada en su hermana, que no puede esperar que compartan las personas ajenas a ella, a un cariño, mucho más importante, que podía haber garantizado la felicidad y la prosperidad de su vida futura.

Pero el daño ya está hecho. La cuestión ahora es: ¿puede remediarse el daño?

Espero y creo que sí. Mi consejo es éste: no acepte un no por respuesta. Déle tiempo para reflexionar sobre lo que ha hecho y para arrepentirse en secreto (como estoy segura de que ocurrirá). Confíe en que ejerceré mi influencia sobre ella y defenderé su causa a la menor ocasión. Aguarde pacientemente el momento oportuno y pídaselo de nuevo. Acostumbrados a reflexionar antes de actuar, los hombres están siempre demasiado dispuestos a creer que las mujeres hacen lo mismo. Las mujeres no hacen nada parecido. Actúan por impulsos, y en nueve casos de cada diez, luego se arrepienten de todo corazón.

Mientras tanto, debe usted ocuparse de sus propios intereses, induciendo a su tío a cambiar de opinión o, al menos, a hacer la concesión de guardarse sus opiniones para él solo. La señora Tyrrel ha sacado la precipitada conclusión de que el almirante causó el daño intencionadamente o, lo que es lo mismo, que tenía la convicción profética cuando entró en la casa de la reacción que ella tendría cuando la abandonara. Mi explicación es mucho más simple. Creo que al hacerle usted partícipe de sus sentimientos, despertó en él la lógica curiosidad por ver al objeto de éstos, y que los imprudentes elogios que dedicó a Norah irritaron al almirante haciendo que manifestara sus objeciones abiertamente. En cualquier caso, el camino que debe seguir es igualmente claro. Haga uso del ascendiente que tiene sobre su tío y convénzale para que aclare las cosas.
Confíe en mi total determinación de ver a Norah convertida en su esposa antes de que pasen seis meses. Con los mejores deseos, su amiga,

HARRIET GARTH

IV

DE LA SEÑORA DRAKE A GEORGE BARTRAM

St. Crux, 17 de abril

Señor:

Le dirijo estas líneas al hotel donde suele alojarse en Londres con la esperanza de que regrese pronto del extranjero y reciba mi carta sin demora.

Lamento tener que comunicarle que se han producido ciertos sucesos desagradables en St. Crux desde que usted se fue y que mi honorable amo, el almirante, dista mucho de gozar de su buena salud habitual. Por ambos motivos me he atrevido a escribirle bajo mi propia responsabilidad, pues considero que su presencia es necesaria en la casa.

A principios de este mes se produjo una lamentable circunstancia. El señor Mazey descubrió a la camarera nueva hurgando a altas horas de la noche (y con la cesta de llaves del amo en su poder) en los documentos personales que el almirante guarda en la biblioteca del ala este. La chica abandonó la casa a la mañana siguiente antes de que nos levantáramos y no se ha sabido nada de ella desde entonces. Este suceso ha molestado y alarmado al amo muy seriamente y, para empeorar las cosas, el mismo día en que se descubrió el comportamiento traicionero de la chica, el almirante mostró los primeros síntomas de un grave catarro inflamatorio. Ni él ni nadie sabe cómo pudo enfriarse. Se envió a buscar al médico, que consiguió bajar la inflamación hasta anteayer, momento en que volvió a manifestarse en circunstancias que estoy convencida de que lamentará oír tanto como yo lamento tener que escribir.

En el día mencionado -me refiero al quince de este mes-, el amo en persona me informó de que había sufrido una terrible decepción a causa de una carta de usted, que había llegado por la mañana desde el extranjero y que era portadora de malas noticias. No me dijo cuáles eran esas noticias, pero en todos los años que he pasado al servicio del almirante, jamás lo había visto tan alterado y fuera de sí como aquel día. Por la noche su inquietud fue en aumento. Se hallaba en un estado de irritación tal que no pudo soportar el sonido de la fuerte respiración del señor Mazey junto a su puerta y ordenó al anciano taxativamente que se fuera a uno de los dormitorios a pasar la noche. Naturalmente, aunque con gran pesar por su parte, el señor Mazey se vio obligado a obedecer.

Dado que nos privaba así del único medio de que disponíamos para impedir que el almirante abandonara la habitación mientras dormía si desgraciadamente tenía un ataque de sonambulismo, el señor Mazey y yo acordamos turnarnos para hacer guardia durante la noche, sentados en una de las habitaciones vacías cercanas al dormitorio del amo con la puerta abierta de par en par. No se nos ocurrió otra cosa mejor, puesto que sabíamos que no iba a permitir que lo encerráramos con llave y, aunque nos hubiéramos atrevido a encerrarlo sin su permiso, no disponíamos de la llave. Yo hice guardia durante las dos primeras horas; luego me reemplazó el señor Mazey. Cuando llevaba un rato en mi dormitorio, recordé que el anciano es duro de oído y comprendí que, si se le cerraban los ojos durante la noche, no podía confiar en que su oído le advirtiera si sucedía algo. Volví a vestirme y regresé junto al señor Mazey. No estaba ni dormido ni despierto, sino en un estado intermedio. Tuve un presentimiento y me dirigí a la habitación del almirante. La puerta estaba abierta y la cama, vacía.

El señor Mazey y yo bajamos al instante. Registramos todas las habitaciones del ala

norte, una por una, y no hallamos el menor rastro de él. Entonces pensé en el salón y, dado que era la más ágil de los dos, me encaminé hacia allí para comprobarlo. En el momento en que daba la vuelta al recodo del corredor, vi al amo entrando por la puerta abierta del salón, caminando en sueños y con la cesta de las llaves en la mano. A su espalda, la puerta corredera también estaba abierta. Temí entonces, con un temor que ha perdurado hasta hoy, que su sueño lo hubiera conducido a través del salón de banquetes hasta las habitaciones del ala este. No pensamos en despertarlo, pero seguimos sus pasos hasta que éstos lo llevaron de nuevo al dormitorio. A la mañana siguiente, me apena decirlo, se reprodujeron todos los síntomas del catarro; ninguno de los remedios empleados han conseguido vencerlos. Por consejo del médico, nos abstuvimos de contar al almirante lo que había sucedido. Así pues, él cree haber pasado la noche como de costumbre, en su propia habitación.

He sido puntillosa al entrar en todos los detalles de este desafortunado accidente porque ni el señor Mazey ni yo deseamos evitar la culpa, si la culpa merecemos. Ambos actuamos como mejor supimos, y ambos pedimos y rogamos que regrese usted lo antes posible a St. Crux, dada la grave responsabilidad que ha recaído sobre nosotros. Nuestro honorable amo es muy difícil de llevar y el médico piensa, como nosotros, que la presencia de usted es necesaria en la casa.

Con mis respetos y los del señor Mazey, su humilde servidora,

SOPHIA DRAKE

V

DE GEORGE BARTRAM A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

St. Crux, 22 de abril

Querida señorita Garth:

Le ruego que me disculpe por no haberle expresado antes mi agradecimiento por su amable y consoladora carta. Nos hallamos en St. Crux en una triste situación. Cualquier pequeña irritación que hubiera podido sentir por la desafortunada intromisión de mi pobre tío en Portland Place ha quedado olvidada por la desgracia de su grave enfermedad. Sufre de una congestión producida por enfriamiento, y tales síntomas son por sí solos bastante peligrosos a su edad. Un médico de Londres ha venido a la casa. Dentro de unos días la informaré de lo que suceda. Reciba entretanto, mi sincera gratitud.

Le saluda atentamente,

VI

DEL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE A LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE

Lincoln's Inn Fields, 6 de mayo

Querida señora:

He recibido inesperadamente información de vital importancia para su caso. Esta misma mañana me ha llegado la noticia de la muerte del almirante Bartram. Falleció en su hogar el día cuatro del presente mes.

Este suceso zanja todas las consideraciones de las que había intentado convencerla previamente en relación a su descubrimiento en St. Crux. El camino más sensato que podemos seguir ahora es ponernos en contacto de inmediato con los albaceas del caballero fallecido, por medio del consejero legal del almirante en primer lugar.

Hoy he enviado una carta al abogado en cuestión. En ella simplemente se le advierte de que ha llegado a nuestro conocimiento la existencia de un documento privado que regula el uso que el difunto caballero debía dar a la herencia recibida por el testamento del señor Noel Vanstone. En mi carta doy por sentado que el documento se hallará con facilidad entre los papeles del almirante y menciono que soy el abogado designado por la señora de Noel Vanstone para recibir toda comunicación destinada a ella. Mi propósito al dar este paso es conseguir que se instituya la búsqueda del fideicomiso -en el más que probable caso de que los albaceas no hayan tropezado todavía con él- antes de que se tomen las medidas habituales para la administración de los bienes del almirante. Amenazaremos con emprender acciones legales si no lo conseguimos, pero no preveo tal necesidad. Los albaceas del almirante Bartram deben de ser hombres de alto rango y querrán ser justos con usted y consigo mismos en este asunto; podemos confiar en que buscarán el fideicomiso.

En tales circunstancias, se preguntará usted, naturalmente: «¿Cuáles son nuestras expectativas cuando se encuentre el documento?». Nuestras expectativas tienen un lado malo y otro bueno. Empecemos por el lado bueno.

Sabemos, en primer lugar, que el fideicomiso existe realmente. Segundo, que hay en él una disposición referida al matrimonio del señor George Bartram en un plazo de tiempo determinado. Tercero, que ese plazo (seis meses desde la fecha de la muerte del marido de usted) expiró el día tres de este mes. Cuarto, que el señor George Bartram es, en estos momentos, un hombre soltero (cosa que he averiguado por mis propios medios, dado que usted no poseía información concluyente a ese respecto). De todo ello se deriva la conclusión lógica de que las condiciones del fideicomiso, en este caso, no se han cumplido.

Si no fueron añadidas otras disposiciones en el documento -o si, habiendo sido añadidas, se descubre que tampoco se han cumplido-, creo que a los albaceas les será imposible (especialmente si se encuentra evidencia de que el almirante se consideraba obligado por los términos del fideicomiso) administrar la fortuna de su marido como parte de la herencia del almirante Bartram. En la herencia del señor Vanstone se declara de manera expresa que su destinatario era el almirante, en el caso de que cumpliera con ciertas condiciones, aquellas precisamente que no se han cumplido. ¿Qué se hará, pues, con el dinero? No estaba destinado al almirante propiamente, según dice el mismo testador, y las intenciones con las que fue legado no han sido, ni podrán ser, llevadas a cabo. Creo (si estas suposiciones se constatan) que el dinero debe volver a formar parte de los bienes del testador. En ese caso, tendrá que ser la ley quien se ocupe de la herencia y la dividirá en dos partes equitativas: una mitad para la viuda sin descendencia del señor Noel Vanstone; la otra, repartida entre los parientes más cercanos del difunto.

Habrá descubierto usted, obviamente, el obstáculo para que el caso se resuelva a nuestro favor tal como le he señalado. Sin duda comprenderá usted que no depende de una contingencia, sino de que varias de ellas se produzcan exactamente tal y como deseamos que sucedan. Admito la importancia del obstáculo, pero puedo decirle, al mismo tiempo, que las antedichas contingencias no son de ninguna manera tan improbables como puedan parecer.

Tenemos razones para creer que ni el fideicomiso ni el testamento fueron redactados por un abogado. Esta circunstancia obra a nuestro favor; en todo caso es suficiente para sembrar una duda sobre la validez del documento o, cuando menos, de aquellas disposiciones sobre las que podemos no haber sido informados. Otra posibilidad con la que podemos contar, en mi opinión, radica en ese extraño texto manuscrito que usted vio añadido bajo la firma de la tercera página de la carta, pero que desafortunadamente no leyó. Es muy probable que aquellas líneas fueran escritas por el almirante Bartram, y la posición que ocupan abona la suposición de que el fideicomiso consiguió el importante objetivo de obligarle moralmente.

No querría hacerle cobrar falsas esperanzas. Sólo deseo asegurarle que merece la pena seguir con el caso.

En cuanto al lado malo de nuestras expectativas, no necesito extenderme. Después de lo dicho, comprenderá usted que si existe una disposición válida en el fideicomiso, desconocida para nosotros, que haya sido cumplida por el almirante -o que pueda ser cumplida por sus representantes-, nuestras esperanzas se verán desbaratadas. La herencia, en este caso, se destinaría al propósito o propósitos previstos por su marido y, desde ese momento, usted no podría presentar demanda.

Sólo me queda por añadir que, tan pronto como reciba noticias de los representantes legales del almirante, será usted informada de los resultados.

Le saluda atentamente,

JOHN LOSCOMBE

VII

DE GEORGE BARTRAM A LA SEÑORITA GARTH

St. Crux, 15 de mayo

Querida señorita Garth:

La molesto con otra carta, en parte para agradecerle sus amables condolencias en consideración a la pérdida que he sufrido, y en parte para informarle sobre una extraordinaria solicitud recibida por los albaceas de mi tío en la que tanto usted como la señorita Vanstone pueden sentirse interesadas, pues concierne directamente a la señora de Noel Vanstone.

Dada mi ignorancia de los tecnicismos legales, incluyo una copia de la solicitud en lugar de intentar describirla. Se dará usted cuenta del hecho sospechoso de que no se explique la forma en que fue descubierto uno de los secretos de mi tío, por personas totalmente desconocidas para él.

Tras recibir esta comunicación, inmediatamente los albaceas recurrieron a mí. Yo no pude darles información alguna, pues mi tío no me consultaba jamás tales asuntos. Pero consideré que era una cuestión de honor decirles que durante los últimos seis meses de su vida, de vez en cuando, el almirante había manifestado en mi presencia un desasosiego que me llevó a pensar que se hallaba abrumado por algún tipo de responsabilidad personal. También les conté que me había impuesto una extraña condición -que, pese a sus afirmaciones, yo estaba convencido de que no podía ser idea suya-: si quería recibir cierta suma de dinero, debía casarme en un plazo determinado (plazo que ya ha vencido). Se trataba, según creo, de la misma suma que le había legado mi primo en su testamento. Los albaceas convinieron conmigo en que estas circunstancias daban visos de probabilidad a lo que, en caso contrario, sería una historia increíble. Decidieron que debía instituirse la búsqueda de un fideicomiso secreto, puesto que hasta entonces, entre los papeles del almirante, no se había hallado nada que se le pareciera remotamente.

Hace una semana que se emprendió con ahínco esta búsqueda (nada fácil en una casa como ésta). La supervisan los dos albaceas testamentarios junto con el abogado de mi tío, al que el señor Loscombe (el abogado de la señora de Noel Vanstone) conoce personal y profesionalmente, y que participa en la búsqueda por expreso deseo de dicho señor Loscombe. Hasta ahora no se ha encontrado nada en absoluto. Se han examinado miles y miles de cartas; ninguna de ellas tiene el menor parecido con la carta que estamos buscando.

Dentro de una semana se dará la búsqueda por finalizada. De hecho, se ha prolongado durante tanto tiempo únicamente por expreso deseo mío. Dado que la generosidad del almirante me ha convertido en único heredero de cuanto poseía, me siento obligado a hacer justicia en favor de otros, por mucho que ello me perjudique.

Con este fin, no he vacilado en revelar al abogado una peculiaridad constitucional de mi pobre tío que se mantuvo siempre en secreto fuera del círculo estrictamente familiar, a petición suya; me refiero a su tendencia al sonambulismo. Le conté que su ama de llaves y su viejo sirviente lo habían encontrado caminando en sueños unas tres semanas antes de su muerte, y que la parte de la casa en la que lo habían visto y la cesta de llaves que llevaba en la mano sugería que había estado en una de las habitaciones del ala este y que quizá había abierto alguno de los muebles que hay en ellas. Sorprendí al abogado

(que parecía ignorar por completo las extraordinarias acciones que realizan los sonámbulos) informándole de que mi tío podía moverse por la casa, abrir y cerrar con llave y trasladar objetos de todo tipo de un lugar a otro durante el sueño con la misma facilidad que despierto. Y declaré que, mientras tuviera la más leve sospecha de que mi tío había soñado con el fideicomiso aquella noche en cuestión y llevado su sueño a la práctica mientras dormía, no quedaría satisfecho de la búsqueda hasta que no se registraran de nuevo las habitaciones del ala este.

Sin embargo, debo añadir que no existe el menor fundamento para esta idea mía. Durante la última etapa de su fatal enfermedad, mi pobre tío era totalmente incapaz de hablar de tema alguno. Desde que llegué a St. Crux a mediados del mes pasado hasta el día de su muerte, ni una sola palabra escapó de sus labios que se refiriera en modo alguno al fideicomiso secreto. Así están las cosas por el momento. Si considera usted conveniente comunicar el contenido de esta carta a la señorita Vanstone, le ruego que añada de mi parte que no será por mi culpa si la reclamación de su hermana (por absurda que sea a los ojos de los albaceas de mi tío) no demuestra ser cierta.

Atentamente le saluda,

GEORGE BARTRAM

P.D. Tan pronto como se resuelvan todos estos asuntos, partiré hacia el extranjero con la intención de pasar fuera varios meses buscando consuelo en un cambio de ambiente. La casa se cerrará y quedará a cargo de la señora Drake. No he olvidado que comentó usted en una ocasión que le gustaría ver St. Crux si se hallaba alguna vez por estos contornos. Si por casualidad se hallara usted en Essex mientras yo estoy fuera, he previsto lo necesario para impedir que sufra una decepción dejando instrucciones a la señora Drake de que le permita la libre entrada a la casa y a los jardines, tanto a usted como a cualquier amigo que la acompañe.

VIII

DEL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE A LA SEÑORA DE NOEL VANSTONE

Lincoln's Inn Fields, 24 de mayo

Querida señora:

Tras una semana de búsqueda, conducida, fuerza es decirlo, con el mayor esmero y diligencia, no se ha hallado el fideicomiso secreto entre los papeles dejados en St. Crux por el difunto almirante Bartram.

En estas circunstancias, los albaceas han decidido obrar de acuerdo con la única autoridad admisible de que disponen: el testamento del almirante. Este documento (legalizado hace algunos años) lega a su sobrino la totalidad de sus bienes, tanto raíces como personales (es decir, todas las tierras y el dinero que poseía en el momento de su muerte). El testamento es claro y el resultado, inevitable. A partir de este momento, ha perdido usted todo derecho a la fortuna de su marido. El señor George Bartram la hereda legalmente junto con la casa y las tierras de St. Crux.

No haré comentarios sobre este extraordinario final. Tal vez el fideicomiso fuera destruido o escondido en algún lugar inaccesible. En cualquier caso, en mi opinión es imposible hallar una declaración legalmente válida basada en un conocimiento del documento tan fragmentario e incompleto como el que tiene usted. Si otros abogados discrepan conmigo, consúltelos sin vacilación. He dedicado ya dinero y tiempo suficientes al desafortunado empeño de reivindicar sus derechos; a partir de este momento, mi relación con ese asunto debe darse por concluida.

Su obediente servidor,

JOHN LOSCOMBE

IX

DE LA SEÑORA RUDDOCK (DUEÑA DE LA CASA DE HUÉSPEDES)

AL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE

Park Terrace, St. John's Wood, 2 de junio

Señor:

Habiendo llevado al correo por encargo de la señora de Noel Vanstone algunas de sus cartas dirigidas a usted y no conociendo a nadie más a quien recurrir, le ruego me indique si conoce usted a alguno de sus allegados, pues creo que deberían actuar y tomar medidas sobre ella.

La señora Vanstone vino a esta casa por primera vez el mes de noviembre pasado, cuando ocupó mis habitaciones con su doncella. En aquella ocasión no me dio motivos de queja, y tampoco en ésta. Se ha comportado como una señora y me ha pagado lo que me debía. Le escribo como madre de familia y por sentido de la responsabilidad. No tengo ningún motivo interesado.

Tras darme el debido aviso, la señora Vanstone (que ahora está completamente sola) se marcha de aquí mañana. No me ha ocultado que se halla en difíciles circunstancias y que no puede seguir pagándome. Eso es todo lo que me ha dicho. No sé adonde va ni lo que piensa hacer. Pero tengo razones para creer que desea borrar toda huella que pudiera llevar hasta ella, pues ayer me la encontré llorando y quemando cartas, sin duda de sus allegados. En la última semana su aspecto y su conducta han sufrido un horrible cambio. Creo que algo terrible la ha trastornado y, por lo que veo, temo que se halle al borde de una grave enfermedad. Es muy triste ver a una mujer tan joven completamente desamparada y sin amigos.

Perdóneme por molestarle con esta carta; escribirla era un deber de conciencia. Si conoce usted a algunos de sus parientes, por favor, avíseles de que no hay tiempo que perder. Si no vienen mañana, podrían perder la última oportunidad de verla.

Su humilde servidora,

CATHERINE RUDDOCK

X

DEL SEÑOR LOSCOMBE A LA SEÑOR RUDDOCK

Lincoln's Inn Fields, 2 de junio

Señora:

Mi única relación con la señora de Noel Vanstone era profesional y esa relación ha concluido. No conozco a ninguno de sus allegados y no puedo comprometerme a intervenir de manera personal en su vida privada, presente ni futura.

Lamentando que no me sea posible ofrecerle ayuda,

su obediente servidor,

LA ÚLTIMA ESCENA

Aaron's Buildings

CAPÍTULO I

El siete de junio, los armadores del buque mercante *Liberación* fueron informados de que el barco había hecho escala en Plymouth para el desembarco de pasajeros y de que posteriormente había reanudado su trayecto hasta el puerto de Londres. Cinco días más tarde, el barco se hallaba en el río y era remolcado hasta la dársena de la India Oriental.

Una vez completados los trámites que le incumbían personalmente, el capitán Kirke escribió a la rectoría de su cuñado en Suffolk para anunciar su llegada el día diecisiete de ese mismo mes. Como de costumbre en tales casos, recibió una lista de encargos de su hermana el día antes de abandonar Londres. Uno de esos encargos le llevó a la vecindad de Camden Town. Llegó a destino desde la dársena en un coche de punto y despidió el vehículo; luego se encaminó de nuevo hacia el sur, en dirección a New Road.

No conocía bien aquel distrito de la ciudad y cada vez prestaba menos atención a lo que le rodeaba. Animados por la perspectiva de volver a ver a su hermana, sus pensamientos llevaron su memoria a la noche en que se había despedido de ella abandonando la casa a pie. El hechizo del que había sido víctima de manera tan extraña en aquella época no se había dejado vencer por los acontecimientos posteriores. El rostro que le había obsesionado en la solitaria carretera había seguido atormentándole en el solitario mar. La mujer que lo había seguido, como en un sueño, hasta la puerta de su hermana lo había seguido -pensamiento de sus pensamientos, alma de su alma- hasta la cubierta de su barco. Así en la tormenta como en la calma, durante el viaje de ida, así en la tormenta como en la calma, durante el viaje de vuelta, ella no se había apartado de su lado. Ahora, en el incesante tumulto de las calles de Londres, no se apartaba de él. Kirke sabía cuál iba a ser la primera pregunta que brotaría de sus labios cuando viera a su hermana y a sus sobrinos. «Procuraré hablar de alguna otra cosa -pensó-. Pero cuando Lizzie y yo estemos a solas, saldrá sin que pueda evitarlo.»

La necesidad de esperar a que pasara una recua de carros en una bocacalle para poder cruzar lo devolvió a la realidad. Miró en derredor, momentáneamente confuso. No conocía la calle; se había perdido.

El primer transeúnte al que preguntó parecía no tener tiempo que perder en informarle. Tras indicar con prisas que cruzara la calle, que doblara en la primera bocacalle a mano derecha y que allí volviera a preguntar, el desconocido siguió andando sin ceremonias ni esperar a que le diera las gracias.

Kirke siguió sus indicaciones y torció a la derecha. La calle era corta y estrecha y de míseras casas. Alzó la vista al pasar por la esquina para averiguar dónde se hallaba. El lugar se llamaba Aaron's Buildings.

Calle abajo, en la misma acera de «edificios» en la que él se encontraba, una pequeña multitud de mirones se había congregado en torno a dos coches de punto, ambos detenidos ante la misma puerta. Kirke avanzó hacia la multitud para preguntar el camino a cualquier desconocido cortés que hubiera entre ellos y que no tuviera tanta prisa. Al acercarse a los coches, vio a una mujer peleándose con los cocheros y oyó lo bastante para comprender que se habían enviado dos vehículos por error donde sólo se necesitaba uno.

La puerta de la casa estaba abierta; cuando se volvió a mirar vio el pasillo con facilidad

por encima de las cabezas de la gente.

La visión con que se encontraron sus ojos debería haber sido ocultada a los curiosos de la calle por una mera cuestión de piedad. Kirke vio a una muchacha desaliñada con cara de susto, de pie en mitad del pasillo junto a una silla desvencijada, sosteniendo a la mujer que la ocupaba y que estaba demasiado débil para sostenerse por sí misma. La mujer, que parecía muy enferma, iba a marcharse en uno de los coches cuando terminara la disputa callejera. Cuando Kirke posó sus ojos en ella, tenía la cabeza gacha y el viejo chal que la cubría había caído hacia delante ocultando la parte superior de su rostro.

Antes de que apartara la vista, la muchacha que se ocupaba de ella le levantó la cabeza y devolvió el chal a su sitio. Esta acción dejó la cara al descubierto durante el breve instante en que la cabeza tardó en inclinarse de nuevo sobre el pecho. En ese instante, Kirke vio a la mujer cuya belleza atormentaba su vida, cuya imagen seguía vivida en su recuerdo apenas hacía cinco minutos.

La conmoción del doble reconocimiento -el reconocimiento al mismo tiempo del rostro y del horrible cambio operado en él- lo dejó mudo y paralizado. La presencia de ánimo ante cualquier caso extremo, que había sido una constante en su vida, flaqueó por primera vez. La sórdida calle, la escuálida multitud que rodeaba la puerta, bailaron ante sus ojos. Kirke se tambaleó y se agarró a la verja de hierro de la casa que había a su espalda.

- ¿Adonde la llevan? -oyó que preguntaba una mujer cerca de él.

- Al hospital, si la admiten -fue la respuesta-. O al asilo, si no la quieren allí.

Aquella horrible respuesta le incitó a la acción. Kirke se abrió paso y entró en la casa.

El malentendido se había resuelto en la calle y uno de los coches se había marchado. Kirke atravesó el umbral de la puerta en el momento en que se disponían a trasladar a la mujer. El cochero que se había quedado se hallaba a un lado de la silla y la mujer que antes discutía con los dos cocheros, al otro. La levantaban en el preciso instante en que la alta figura de Kirke se recortó en el umbral.

- ¿Qué están haciendo con esa señora? -preguntó.

El cochero le miró con la insolencia de su respuesta en los ojos antes de que saliera por sus labios, pero la mujer fue más rápida que él, vio la agitación contenida en el rostro de Kirke y soltó la silla inmediatamente.

- ¿La conoce usted, señor? -preguntó con viveza-. ¿Es usted amigo suyo?

- Sí -contestó Kirke sin vacilar.

- No es culpa mía, señor -se defendió la mujer, acobardada por la mirada que Kirke clavó en ella-. Yo hubiera esperado pacientemente hasta que sus amigos la hubieran encontrado, ¡de verdad!

Kirke no dijo nada. Se volvió para hablarle al cochero.

- Salga -dijo- y cierre la puerta. Le enviaré su dinero ahora mismo. ¿De qué habitación la ha sacado para traerla aquí? -preguntó, dirigiéndose de nuevo a la mujer.

- Del dormitorio del primer piso, señor.

- Muéstreme el camino.

Kirke se agachó y alzó en brazos a Magdalen. La cabeza de Magdalen descansó suavemente sobre el pecho del marino; sus ojos se alzaron con perplejidad hacia el rostro del marino. Sonrió y le habló en un susurro incoherente. Imaginaba hallarse de nuevo en su hogar y sus palabras entrecortadas dieron a entender que se creía de nuevo una niña en brazos de su padre.

- ¡Pobre papá! -dijo en voz baja-. ¿Por qué estás tan triste? ¡Pobre papá!

La mujer condujo a Kirke hasta el dormitorio del primer piso. Era muy pequeño y disponía de un mísero mobiliario, pero la estrecha cama estaba limpia y lo poco que había estaba bien cuidado. Kirke depositó a Magdalen en la cama con suavidad. Ella le cogió una mano con sus dedos ardientes.

- No le digas nada a mamá; se preocuparía -dijo-. Que venga Norah. -Kirke intentó desasirse dulcemente, pero ella se aferró a su mano con mayor ansia. Él se sentó entonces a la cabecera de la cama esperando que a ella le apeteciera soltarle. La mujer los miraba desde un rincón sin dejar de llorar. Kirke la observó detenidamente.

- Hable -dijo serenamente y en voz baja al cabo de un rato-. Hable en su presencia y dígame la verdad.

La mujer habló con profusión de lágrimas y de palabras.

Hacía una quincena que había alquilado el primer piso a la señora, que le había pagado un mes de alquiler y le había dado el nombre de Gray. Los tres primeros días, la señora se había ausentado de la mañana a la noche y había vuelto en las tres ocasiones con aspecto de estar agotada y decepcionada. La dueña de la casa había sospechado que se ocultaba de sus allegados bajo un nombre falso y que había intentado en vano conseguir dinero o empleo durante los tres días que había pasado tanto tiempo fuera para luego volver tan decepcionada. Fuera como fuese, al cuarto día había caído enferma, con accesos de frío y de fiebre alternativamente. Al quinto día estaba peor, y al sexto estaba a veces demasiado adormilada para poder hablar con ella o deliraba. El boticario (que se encargaba de dar asistencia médica por aquellos pagos) había ido a verla y había expresado la opinión de que se trataba de una fiebre de carácter grave. Había dejado una «droga salina» que la dueña de la casa pagó de su bolsillo y que había administrado sin resultado. Luego se había tomado la libertad de registrar la única bolsa que tenía por equipaje y no había hallado en ella más que la ropa interior imprescindible; no había vestidos ni adornos, ni siquiera un fragmento de carta que le ayudara a descubrir a sus allegados. Entre el riesgo de dejar que siguiera en su casa en tales circunstancias y la crueldad de echar a la calle a una mujer enferma, la patrona no había vacilado: ella estaba dispuesta a permitir que su inquilina se quedara con la esperanza de que la señora acabara restableciéndose o que sus amigos aparecieran. Pero no hacía ni media hora que su marido -que no se acercaba jamás a la casa sino para pedir dinero- había llegado para robarle sus exiguas ganancias, como de costumbre. Ella se había visto obligada a decirle que no había cobrado alquiler por el primer piso y que no era probable que lo cobrara hasta que la señora se pusiera bien o la encontraran sus amigos. Al oír esto, el marido había insistido sin la menor compasión en que, enferma o no, la señora tenía que irse. Podían llevarla al hospital, y si allí le cerraban las puertas, siempre quedaba el asilo. Si no se había ido al cabo de una hora, el marido amenazaba con volver y sacarla de allí personalmente. Su mujer sabía demasiado bien que era lo bastante animal para cumplir su palabra, así que no tuvo más remedio que hacer lo que exigía, en bien de la propia señora.

La mujer contó esta horrible historia con toda la traza de sentirse sinceramente avergonzada de ella. Cuando se acercaba al final de sus explicaciones, Kirke notó que los dedos ardientes aflojaban la presión alrededor de su mano. Miró hacia la cama. Los cansados ojos de Magdalen se cerraban con el rostro vuelto aún hacia el marino; se sumía en el sueño.

- ¿Hay alguien en la otra habitación? -preguntó Kirke en un susurro-. Venga conmigo, tengo algo que decirle.

La mujer le siguió por la puerta que comunicaba el dormitorio con la habitación contigua.

- ¿Cuánto le debe? -preguntó Kirke.

La patrona indicó la suma. Kirke la colocó sobre la mesa ante ella.

- ¿Dónde está su marido? -fue su siguiente pregunta.

- Esperando en la taberna a que pase la hora.

- Puede usted llevarle el dinero o no, según le convenga -dijo Kirke tranquilamente-. Sólo quiero avisarle de una cosa con respecto a su marido. Que no entre en esta casa mientras yo no esté, si no quiere verlo con todos los huesos rotos. ¡Espere! Aún no he terminado. ¿Sabe de algún médico en la vecindad en quien se pueda confiar?

- No hay ninguno por este barrio, señor. Pero sé de uno que está a media hora de aquí andando.

- Vaya en el coche a buscarlo, y si está en casa, tráigalo con usted. Dígale que le espero aquí para consultarle un grave caso. Le pagaré bien, y también a usted. ¡Deprisa!

La mujer salió de la habitación.

Kirke se sentó a aguardar su regreso. Ocultó el rostro entre las manos e intentó asimilar la extraña y conmovedora situación en la que accidentalmente se encontraba.

Oculta en un barrio sórdido y apartado de Londres, bajo un nombre falso, desamparada y sin amigos, abandonada a la compasión de unos desconocidos por culpa de una enfermedad que había afectado a mente y cuerpo por igual. Así volvía a encontrar a la mujer que había abierto un mundo nuevo de belleza ante sus ojos, ¡la mujer que había despertado el amor en él con una sola mirada! ¿Qué horrible desgracia se había abatido tan cruelmente sobre ella para que hubiera caído tan bajo? ¿Qué enigmático destino le había guiado en la hora de mayor necesidad hasta el último refugio de su pobreza y desesperación? «Si el destino quiere que vuelva a verla otra vez, la veré.» Recordó estas palabras, palabras memorables que dijera a su hermana al despedirse. Con esa idea en su corazón había acudido a la llamada del deber. Meses y meses habían transcurrido; miles y miles de millas de desolada extensión sobre las aguas agitadas los habían separado. Y en ese lapso de tiempo y sobre la inmensidad de los océanos, día tras día y noche tras noche, en su magnífico barco que navegaba con dificultad contra los vientos, había avanzado él acercándose cada vez más al final que le aguardaba; había viajado a ciegas hasta llegar al encuentro en el umbral de aquella miserable casa. «¿Qué me ha traído hasta aquí? -se dijo a sí mismo en un susurro-. ¿La misericordia del azar? ¡No! La misericordia divina.»

Kirke aguardó sin prestar atención al lugar en que se hallaba, sin ser consciente del tiempo transcurrido, hasta que un ruido de pasos en la escalera se interpuso de pronto entre sus pensamientos y él. La puerta se abrió y la patrona mostró el camino al médico.

- El doctor Merrick -dijo, acercándole una silla.

- Señor Merrick -dijo el visitante con una leve sonrisa y se sentó en la silla-. No soy médico. Soy cirujano general.

Médico o cirujano, había algo en su rostro y sus maneras que le hizo de inmediato digno de confianza a los ojos de Kirke.

Tras unas cuantas palabras introductorias, el señor Merrick envió a la patrona al dormitorio para averiguar si la enferma estaba despierta o dormía. La mujer regresó y dijo que estaba «entre las dos cosas, delirando otra vez y ardiendo». El cirujano entró de inmediato en el dormitorio indicando a la patrona que lo siguiera y cerrara la puerta tras ella.

Largos y aburridos minutos transcurrieron hasta que volvió a la salita y, cuando reapareció, su rostro habló por él antes de que le preguntaran.

- ¿Es grave la enfermedad? -preguntó Kirke en voz baja, con expresión preocupada y la vista fija en el rostro del cirujano.

- Es una enfermedad peligrosa -dijo el señor Merrick, poniendo énfasis en esta última

palabra.

El cirujano acercó su silla a Kirke y lo miró detenidamente.

- ¿Puedo hacerle unas preguntas que no son estrictamente médicas? -inquirió.

Kirke inclinó la cabeza.

- ¿Puede usted decirme qué vida ha llevado antes de llegar a esta casa y caer enferma?

- No tengo modo de saberlo. Acabo de regresar a Inglaterra tras una larga ausencia.

- ¿Sabía usted que estaba aquí?

- Lo he descubierto accidentalmente.

- ¿No tiene parientes, una madre, una hermana, que puedan cuidarla aparte de usted?

- Nadie, a menos que consiga encontrar a sus familiares. Nadie más que yo.

El señor Merrick no dijo nada. Miró a Kirke más atentamente que antes. «¡Qué raro! -pensó-. Está aquí como la única persona que se ocupa de ella, ¿y eso es todo lo que sabe?»

Kirke vio su expresión de duda y se dispuso a despejarla antes de que siguieran hablando.

- Veo que le sorprende mi posición en este asunto -dijo con sencillez-. ¿Querría usted considerarme como un pariente, un hermano o un padre, hasta que pueda encontrar a sus allegados? -Se le quebró la voz y puso la mano sobre el brazo del cirujano con gesto serio-. Me he impuesto esta obligación -dijo-, ¡y como hay Dios que seré digno de ella!

La pobre cabeza cansada descansó de nuevo sobre su pecho, los pobres dedos enfebrecidos sujetaron su mano una vez más cuando Kirke pronunció estas palabras.

- Le creo -dijo con calor el cirujano-. Creo que es usted un hombre honesto. Perdóneme si le ha parecido que me entrometía en sus asuntos. Respeto su reserva; a partir de este momento es sagrada para mí. Para ser justos, permítame decirle que las preguntas que le he formulado no eran producto de una mera curiosidad. La enfermedad que la ha postrado en la cama no puede tener una causa corriente. Ha tenido que sufrir una prolongada tensión mental, una incertidumbre agotadora y terrible, que han causado finalmente el colapso. Me hubiera ayudado saber cuál fue el motivo de esa tensión o cuánto tiempo duró hasta caer vencida por ella. Ésa era mi esperanza.

- Cuando me ha dicho usted que su enfermedad es peligrosa -dijo Kirke-, ¿se refería a que es peligrosa para su razón o para su vida?

- Para ambas -respondió el señor Merrick-. Todo su sistema nervioso ha cedido, todas las funciones ordinarias de su cerebro se han colapsado. No puedo darle una explicación más sencilla sobre la naturaleza de la enfermedad. La fiebre que tanto asusta a la patrona es tan sólo el efecto. La causa es la que he mencionado. Puede que pase semanas tumbada en esa cama alternando los estados de delirio con los de reposo sin recobrar la conciencia. No debe alarmarse usted si duerme mucho más tiempo de lo que sería normal. Dormir es el mejor remedio para su enfermedad, su sueño no ha de sufrir la menor perturbación. Todo lo que podemos hacer es vigilarla, ayudarla con estímulos de vez en cuando y esperar a que actúe la Naturaleza.

- ¿Ha de permanecer aquí? ¿No cabría la posibilidad de trasladarla a un lugar mejor?

- Por el momento, ninguna. Según creo, la han molestado ya bastante, y ha empeorado visiblemente por esa causa. Aunque mejore, aunque vuelva en sí, sería un peligroso experimento moverla demasiado pronto, la menor excitación o alarma sería fatal para ella. Tendrá que sacarle el mejor partido posible a este sitio. He dado instrucciones a la patrona y enviaré a una buena enfermera para que la ayude. Nada más puede hacerse.

Su vida está en manos de usted tanto como en las mías, si es que puede decirse que una vida está en manos humanas. Todo depende de los cuidados que reciba en esta casa bajo la dirección de usted. -Tras estas palabras de despedida, el señor Merrick se levantó y abandonó la habitación.

Una vez a solas, Kirke se acercó a la puerta que comunicaba las habitaciones, llamó con unos golpes suaves e indicó a la patrona que quería hablar con ella.

Kirke había recuperado gran parte de su aplomo y de su habitual firmeza tras la entrevista con el cirujano. Un hombre que viviera en el ambiente artificial que Kirke no había respirado jamás habría sido muy consciente de los aspectos materiales de aquella situación extraña y novedosa, de las serias dificultades que le planteaba y de los numerosos equívocos a que podía prestarse en el futuro. Kirke no se paró a pensarlo siquiera. Sólo atendió al deber que le reclamaba, un deber que las últimas palabras del cirujano habían expuesto con claridad ante él. Todo dependía de los cuidados que recibiera en aquella casa, bajo su dirección. Aquélla era su responsabilidad y actuó en consecuencia, de manera inconsciente, del mismo modo que hubiera hecho en un caso de emergencia con mujeres y niños a bordo de su propio barco. Interrogó a la casera con preguntas cortas y secas; el único cambio visible en él fue el tono de su voz, aún más bajo, y la preocupación con que miraba de vez en cuando hacia la habitación donde yacía Magdalen.

- ¿Ha comprendido las instrucciones del cirujano?

- Sí, señor.

- La casa debe mantenerse en silencio. ¿Quién vive aquí?

- Sólo mi hija y yo, señor. Vivimos en las salitas. Las cosas nos han ido mal desde la Anunciación. Las dos habitaciones de arriba están por alquilar.

- Las alquilo yo, y las dos de abajo también. ¿Conoce usted a algún hombre bien dispuesto y digno de confianza que pueda realizar encargos para mí?

- Sí, señor. ¿Quiere usted que vaya...?

- No. Que vaya su hija. No debe usted abandonar la casa hasta que llegue la enfermera. No me mande al recadero aquí arriba; los hombres de su índole suelen pisar fuerte. Bajaré yo y hablaré con él en la puerta.

Kirke bajó cuando llegó el recadero y lo envió a comprar papel, pluma y tinta en primer lugar. A continuación lo despachó en busca de una persona que pudiera encargarse de amortiguar el ruido de las ruedas al rodar por la calle vertiendo restos de cortezas delante de la casa, como era habitual. Una vez cumplido el encargo, el mensajero tuvo que llevar dos cartas al correo. La primera estaba dirigida al cuñado de Kirke. En ella le comunicaba brevemente lo que había ocurrido y le indicaba que diera la noticia a su mujer como creyera oportuno. La segunda carta iba dirigida al dueño del hotel de Aldborough. El nombre falso de Magdalen en Aldborough era el único por el que la conocía Kirke; se le había ocurrido que la única posibilidad de hallar a sus parientes estribaba en seguir el rastro de sus supuestos tíos desde Aldborough.

Hacia el final de la tarde, una respetable matrona de mediana edad llegó a la casa con una carta del señor Merrick. El cirujano respondía de ella como persona cuidadosa en quien se podía confiar; había cuidado a su propia esposa. De vez en cuando le ayudaría una señora que era miembro de una comunidad religiosa del distrito y que había mostrado un caritativo interés por aquel caso. El cirujano iría a visitar a la paciente hacia las ocho de la tarde para cerciorarse de que no le faltaba nada.

La llegada de la enfermera y el alivio de saber que podía confiar en ella permitieron a Kirke pensar en sí mismo. Tenía el equipaje preparado para el viaje a Suffolk previsto para el día siguiente. Sencillamente sería necesario trasladarlo del hotel a la casa de Aaron's Buildings.

Kirke se detuvo sólo una vez en su camino al hotel para mirar el escaparate de una juguetería en una de las calles principales. Los barcos en miniatura le recordaron a su sobrino. «Mi pequeño tocayo sufrirá una decepción cuando vea que no llego mañana -pensó-. Tengo que compensar al niño enviándole un regalo de parte de su tío.» Entró en la tienda y compró uno de los barcos. Lo embalaron y pusieron en su presencia la dirección a la que debía enviarse. Kirke puso una tarjeta en la cubierta del barco en miniatura antes de que clavetearan la tapa de la caja, con esta frase:

«Un barco para el pequeño marino con todo el cariño del marino grande.»

- A los niños les gusta que les escriban, señora -dijo con tono de disculpa a la dependienta-. Envíen la caja lo antes posible. Me gustaría que el niño la recibiera mañana.

Kirke regresó a Aaron's Building con su equipaje hacia el anochecer. Se quitó las botas en el pasillo y llevó él mismo su baúl arriba, deteniéndose al pasar por el primer piso para preguntar por la enferma. El señor Merrick se encontraba allí para contestarle.

- Hace unos minutos se ha despertado y deliraba -dijo el cirujano-. Pero hemos conseguido tranquilizarla y ahora duerme.

- ¿No ha dicho nada que pudiera ayudarnos a encontrar a sus allegados, señor?

El señor Merrick meneó la cabeza.

- Puede que pasen muchas semanas -dijo- y que la historia de esa pobre muchacha siga siendo un misterio para nosotros. Lo único que podemos hacer es esperar.

Así concluyó el día, el primero de muchos que estaban por venir.

CAPÍTULO II

Los cálidos rayos del sol de julio filtrándose a través de una persiana verde; una ventana abierta con flores recién cortadas en el alféizar; una cama extraña en una habitación extraña; una figura gigantesca del sexo femenino (como un sueño de la señora Wragge) alzándose junto a la cama, a punto de dar una palmada; otra mujer deteniendo (rápidamente) esas manos para que no hicieran ruido; una voz dulce protestando (de nuevo como un sueño de la señora Wragge), rompiendo el silencio con estas palabras: «Me conoce, señora, me conoce. ¡Si no puedo mostrar mi felicidad, me dará un ataque!». Tales fueron las primeras imágenes y los primeros sonidos a los que, después de seis semanas de inconsciencia, despertó Magdalen de modo súbito y extraño.

Después de un rato, las imágenes volvieron a hacerse borrosas y los sonidos se hicieron silencio. El misericordioso sueño se adueñó de ella una vez más y la devolvió a la tranquilidad del reposo.

Un día más, y las imágenes y los sonidos se hicieron más claros. Otro, y oyó la voz de un hombre al otro lado de la puerta pidiendo noticias de la enferma. No conocía la voz; la voz hablaba siempre en un prudente tono bajo y sereno. Preguntaba por ella por la mañana, cuando ella se despertaba; al mediodía, cuando tomaba el almuerzo; por la noche, antes de que volviera a dormirse. «¿Quién se preocupa tanto por mí?». Ése fue el primer pensamiento que pudo formarse en su cabeza cuando estuvo lo bastante fuerte: «¿Quién se preocupa tanto por mí?».

Transcurrieron más días; pudo hablar con la enfermera. Pudo responder a las preguntas de un hombre mayor que sabía mucho más de ella que ella misma y que declaró ser el señor Merrick, cirujano. Pudo incorporarse en la cama, apoyada en unas almohadas, preguntándose qué le había ocurrido y dónde estaba. Pudo sentir una curiosidad creciente por la voz serena que seguía preguntando por ella mañana, mediodía y noche, al otro lado de la puerta.

Un nuevo día, y el señor Merrick le preguntó si se sentía con fuerzas para ver a una vieja amiga. Una voz afable detrás de él habló desde arriba:

- Soy yo. -La voz fue seguida por la portentosa aparición corpórea de la señora Wragge con la cofia torcida; se había dejado uno de sus zapatos en la otra habitación-. ¡Oh, mírenla, mírenla! -exclamó la señora Wragge, extasiada, cayendo de rodillas a la cabecera de la cama con un golpe sordo que sacudió toda la casa-. Dios del Cielo, ya se ha recuperado lo bastante para reírse de mí. «¡Ánimo, chicos, ánimo...!» Perdóneme, doctor, ya sé que mi conducta no es propia de una señora. Es mi cabeza, señor, no soy yo. Tengo que desahogarme de alguna manera ¡o me estallará la cabeza! -Aquella mañana fue imposible arrancar una sola respuesta coherente a la señora Wragge. No hizo más que pasar de una cima de confusión verbal a otra, e incomprensiblemente terminó su visita debajo de la cama, buscando a tientas el segundo zapato.

Llegó la mañana y el señor Merrick prometió que vería a otro viejo amigo al día siguiente. Por la noche, cuando la voz preguntó por ella como de costumbre y la puerta se abrió unos centímetros para dar la respuesta, Magdalen respondió débilmente por sí misma: «Estoy mejor, gracias». Hubo un momento de silencio y luego, justo cuando la puerta volvía a cerrarse, la voz se convirtió en un susurro y dijo con fervor: «¡Gracias a Dios!». ¿Quién era aquel hombre? Magdalen se lo había preguntado a todo el mundo y nadie quería decírselo. ¿Quién era?

Llegó el día siguiente y Magdalen oyó que la puerta se abría con suavidad. Unos pasos ligeros y vivaces entraron en la habitación, una figura menuda y ágil se acercó a la cama. ¿Era un sueño? ¡No! Allí estaba él, en su auténtico ser imperecedero, derramando su copioso y desenvuelto flujo verbal, con su brillante pincelada de humor chispeando en sus ojos bicolores; allí estaba él, más audaz, más persuasivo, más respetable que nunca, con un traje de lustroso negro, con un inmaculado corbatín

blanco y una exuberante pechera: ¡el desvergonzado, el invencible, el incorregible Wragge!

- ¡Ni una sola palabra, mi querida niña! -dijo el capitán, acomodándose en una silla a la cabecera de la cama con su aire familiar de siempre-. Yo me encargaré de hablar y creo que reconocerá que no podría hallarse hombre más capaz para ello. Estoy realmente encantado, honradamente encantado, si se me permite utilizar una palabra en apariencia inapropiada, de verla de nuevo y en proceso de recuperación. He pensado en usted a menudo; la he echado de menos a menudo. A menudo me he dicho a mí mismo: ¡olvídala! Despeja el escenario y baja el telón sobre el pasado. *Dum vivimus, vivamus* Perdóneme la pedantería de la cita latina, querida, y dígame qué tal me ve. ¿Soy o no soy la viva imagen de un hombre próspero?

Magdalen intentó responderle. El torrente de palabras del capitán se desbordó sobre ella de nuevo inmediatamente.

- No se esfuerce -dijo el capitán-. Yo mismo me haré las preguntas. ¿Qué he estado haciendo? ¿Por qué tengo este aspecto tan increíblemente acomodado? ¿Y cómo he podido llegar hasta esta casa? Mi querida niña, desde que nos vimos por última vez he estado ocupado en alterar ligeramente mis viejos hábitos profesionales. He pasado de la agricultura moral a la agricultura médica. Antes, me aprovechaba de la compasión pública, ahora me aprovecho del estómago público. Estómago y compasión, compasión y estómago; piense en ello detenidamente cuando pase de la peligrosa edad de los cincuenta y convendrá conmigo en que vienen a ser lo mismo. Sea como sea, aquí estoy, por increíble que parezca; soy un hombre con ingresos, por fin. Las bases de mi fortuna son tres. Sus nombres son áloe, escamonea y gutagamba. En otras palabras, ahora vivo de... una píldora. Gané algo de dinero (si lo recuerda) gracias a mi amistosa asociación con usted. Recibí un poco más por el feliz fallecimiento (*requiescat in pace*) de la pariente de la señora Wragge con respecto a la cual, como ya le expliqué, mi mujer tenía ciertas expectativas. Perfectamente. ¿Qué cree usted que hice? Invertí de un solo golpe todo mi capital en anuncios, y compré las drogas y las cajitas para las píldoras a crédito. El resultado lo tiene ahora ante usted. Aquí estoy: una grandiosa realidad económica. Aquí estoy, con la ropa pagada, con saldo positivo en el banco, con un criado de librea y una calesa a la puerta: solvente, floreciente, popular. Y todo gracias a una píldora.

Magdalen sonrió. El rostro del capitán adoptó una expresión de falsa gravedad; daba la impresión de que todo aquello tuviera un lado serio y de que se dispusiera a exponerlo a continuación.

- Para el público, querida, no es cosa de risa -dijo-. No pueden librarse ni de mí ni de mi píldora; tienen que tomarnos a los dos. No hay una sola forma de atraer la atención dentro de la variedad de formas humanas de anunciarse que no esté usando con el desventurado público en estos momentos. Que alquilan la última novela, allí estoy yo, en el interior de la encuadernación de cartoné del libro. Que envían a comprar la última canción, en el instante en que abren las hojas, me deslizo yo fuera. Que cogen un coche de punto, entro yo volando por la ventanilla, en letra roja. Que compran una caja de polvo dentífrico en la botica, yo la envuelvo en letra azul. Que van al teatro, caigo yo revoloteando en letra amarilla. Los títulos de mis anuncios son simplemente irresistibles. Permítame que le cite unos cuantos de los distribuidos la semana pasada. Título proverbial: «Una píldora a tiempo te ahorrará ciento». Título familiar: «Disculpe, ¿qué tal su estómago?». Título patriótico: «¿Cuáles son las tres características de un inglés de pura cepa? Su corazón, su hogar y su píldora». Título en forma de diálogo infantil: «Mamá, no me encuentro bien». «¿Qué te pasa, cariño mío?» «Quiero una píldora.» Título en forma de anécdota histórica: «Nuevo hallazgo en la mina de la historia inglesa. Cuando asfixiaron a los príncipes en la Torre, su fiel sirviente recogió sus escasas pertenencias. Entre las conmovedoras insignificancias que tan queridas eran para los pobres niños, encontró una cajita. Contenía la píldora del momento. Es necesario señalar que aquella píldora era muy inferior a su sucesora, que príncipes y campesinos por igual pueden obtener ahora». Etcétera, etcétera. El lugar en el que se elabora mi píldora es un anuncio en sí mismo. Tengo una de las tiendas más grandes de Londres. Detrás de un mostrador (visible al público a través de una luna) trabajan en la

confección de la píldora veinticuatro hombres jóvenes con blancos mandiles. Detrás de otro mostrador hay veinticuatro hombres jóvenes con blancos corbatines haciendo las cajitas. Al fondo de la tienda hay tres contables de mayor edad pasando las innumerables transacciones financieras derivadas de la píldora a enormes libros mayores. Sobre la puerta se han colocado mi nombre, mi retrato y mi firma aumentados a proporciones colosales y rodeados por el lema del establecimiento en grandes letras: «¡Abajo los médicos!». Incluso la señora Wragge ha contribuido con su parte a esta prodigiosa empresa. Ella es la celebrada mujer a la que he curado de indescriptibles dolores producidos por todas las enfermedades imaginables. Su retrato está grabado en todos los envoltorios con la siguiente inscripción: «Antes de que tomara la píldora podría haberla derribado con una pluma. ¡Fíjese ahora en ella!». Y por último, pero no menos importante, mi querida niña, la píldora ha sido la causa de que la haya encontrado a usted. Mi trabajo en la prodigiosa empresa que acabo de describirle consiste en recorrer el Reino Unido en calesa abriendo agencias por doquier. Me hallaba ocupado en esta tarea cuando recibí noticias de un amigo mío que acababa de arribar a Inglaterra tras un largo viaje por mar. Conseguí su dirección de Londres; era un inquilino de esta casa. Vine en seguida a visitarlo, y me quedé atónito por la noticia de su enfermedad, querida. Ésta es, en resumen, la historia de mi relación actual con la medicina británica, y así, casualmente, puede usted verme ahora sentado en esta silla, ahora como siempre, su humilde servidor, Horatio Wragge.

De esta forma concluyó el capitán su declaración personal. Cuanto más se acercaba al fin, más atentamente miraba a Magdalen. ¿Tenían sus últimas palabras una importancia latente que no era visible en apariencia? En efecto. Su visita a la enferma tenía un serio propósito; había llegado el momento de abordarlo.

Al describir las circunstancias en las que había llegado a su conocimiento la situación de Magdalen, el capitán Wragge había bordeado los límites de la verdad con su acostumbrada destreza. Envalentonado ya fuera por la ausencia de escándalo público en relación con el matrimonio de Noel Vanstone, ya fuera por el suceso de su muerte, anunciada en las necrológicas del periódico, el capitán, que se hallaba recorriendo el circuito del este, se había aventurado a volver a Aldborough hacía quince días para abrir una agencia de venta de su milagrosa píldora. Nadie lo había reconocido salvo la patrona del hotel, que al punto insistió en que el capitán entrara en el hotel y leyera la carta de Kirke dirigida a su marido. Esa misma noche, el capitán Wragge se hallaba en Londres y se encerraba con el marino en la habitación del segundo piso de Aaron's Buildings.

La grave naturaleza de la situación, la certeza indudable de que Kirke no conseguiría encontrar a los allegados de Magdalen a menos que supiera primero quién era ella en realidad, decidió al capitán a revelar la verdad, al menos en parte. Rehusando entrar en detalles -por razones familiares que Magdalen explicaría cuando se restableciera, si quería-, el capitán dejó a Kirke pasmado al contarle que la mujer desamparada a la que había rescatado y a la que hasta entonces conocía como señorita Bygrave no era otra que la hija menor de Andrew Vanstone. Naturalmente, al descubrimiento del nombre auténtico de Magdalen siguió la revelación, por parte de Kirke, de la relación de su propio padre con el joven oficial Vanstone en Canadá. El capitán Wragge había expresado su sorpresa, pero sin hacer más comentarios por el momento. Sin embargo, quince días más tarde, cuando el restablecimiento de la enferma impuso al cirujano la grave dificultad de responder a las preguntas que sin duda le haría Magdalen, el ingenio del capitán acudió, como de costumbre, al rescate.

- Puede decirle la verdad -dijo-, pero sin avivar los dolorosos recuerdos de su estancia en Aldborough, que no estoy autorizado a revelar. No le diga, todavía, que tan sólo la conocía como la señorita Bygrave de North Shingles cuando la encontró en esta casa. Sea audaz y cuéntele que sabía quién era y que había considerado (como ella habrá de considerar) que tenía un derecho hereditario a ayudarla y protegerla por ser hijo de quien era. Yo soy, como ya le he explicado -prosiguió el capitán, ateniéndose con firmeza a su vieja reivindicación-, un pariente lejano de la familia de Combe-Raven, y si no hay nadie más a mano que pueda ayudarle a vencer estas dificultades, me hallará usted a su entera disposición.

No había nadie más a mano y la situación era desesperada. Unos desconocidos que asumieran la responsabilidad podrían agitar involuntariamente recuerdos pasados que quizá podrían significar la muerte para Magdalen si se revivían demasiado pronto. Unos parientes cercanos que aparecieran prematuramente a la cabecera de su cama podrían producir el mismo deplorable resultado. La disyuntiva estaba en irritarla y alarmarla por no contestar a sus preguntas o confiar en el capitán Wragge. En opinión del cirujano, el segundo riesgo era el menor de los dos; por ello el capitán se hallaba sentado en aquel momento junto a Magdalen, en el ejercicio de la confianza depositada en él.

¿Haría Magdalen la pregunta que quería inducir de manera ligera y agradable el capitán Wragge con su discurso preliminar? Sí, tan pronto como el capitán Wragge calló, dándole esa oportunidad, Magdalen preguntó quién era ese amigo suyo que vivía en la casa.

- Tiene usted tanto derecho a saberlo como yo mismo -dijo el capitán-. Es el hijo de uno de los antiguos amigos militares de su padre, de la época en que su padre estuvo acuartelado con su regimiento en Canadá. ¡No debe ruborizarse! Si se ruboriza me iré.

Magdalen estaba atónita, pero no alterada. El capitán Wragge había empezado por interesarla en el pasado remoto, que ella sólo conocía de oídas, antes de aventurarse en el delicado terreno de la propia vida de Magdalen.

Instantes después, Magdalen avanzaba hasta su siguiente pregunta. ¿Cómo se llamaba?

- Kirke -dijo el capitán-. ¿No oyó nunca hablar de su padre, el comandante Kirke, el jefe del regimiento en Canadá? ¿No oyó nunca decir que el comandante ayudó a su padre en un momento de gran apuro como el mejor de los camaradas y el mejor de los amigos?

Sí, Magdalen creía recordar vagamente que había oído algo sobre su padre y un oficial que había sido muy bueno con él cuando era joven. Pero Magdalen no podía mirar hacia atrás durante demasiado tiempo. ¿Era pobre el señor Kirke?

Incluso el perspicaz capitán Wragge se desconcertó ante esta pregunta y contestó la verdad al azar.

- No -dijo-, no es pobre.

La siguiente pregunta de Magdalen delató sus pensamientos. Si el señor Kirke no era pobre, ¿cómo era que vivía en aquella casa?

«¡Me ha pillado! -pensó el capitán-. Sólo hay un modo de escapar. Debo administrarle otra dosis de verdad.»

- El señor Kirke la encontró aquí por casualidad -prosiguió en voz alta-, muy enferma y desatendida. Alguien tenía que hacerse cargo de usted mientras no pudiera hacerse cargo de sí misma. ¿Por qué no el señor Kirke? Es el hijo del viejo amigo de su padre, que es lo más parecido a ser un viejo amigo de usted. ¿Quién mejor que él para enviar a buscar la ayuda médica adecuada y la enfermera adecuada, cuando yo no estaba aquí para curarla con mi maravillosa píldora? ¡Calma, calma! No debe usted cogerme la delicadísima manga negra de mi levita de esa manera tan poco ceremoniosa.

El capitán colocó la mano de Magdalen de nuevo sobre la cama, pero ella no estaba dispuesta a permitir que la detuvieran. Se obstinó en hacer otra pregunta. ¿Cómo era posible que el señor Kirke la conociera? Ella no lo había visto nunca, jamás había oído hablar de él en toda su vida.

- Es muy probable -dijo el capitán Wragge-, pero el hecho de que usted no lo viera, no es razón para que él no la haya visto a usted.

- ¿Cuándo me vio?

El capitán interrumpió sus dosis de verdad en el acto sin vacilar un solo instante.

- Hace algún tiempo, querida. No puedo decirle cuándo exactamente.

- ¿Sólo una vez?

De pronto el capitán Wragge vio el camino libre para administrar una nueva dosis.

- Sí -dijo-, sólo una vez.

Magdalen reflexionó. La siguiente pregunta era la expresión simultánea de dos ideas; le costó un gran esfuerzo.

- Sólo me vio una vez -dijo-, y hace ya algún tiempo. ¿Cómo es que me recordaba cuando me encontró aquí?

- ¡Aja! -dijo el capitán-. Por fin ha puesto el dedo en la llaga. No puede estar usted más sorprendida que yo. Un consejo, querida. Cuando esté lo bastante bien para levantarse y ver al señor Kirke, pruebe a ver cómo suena esa aguda pregunta en sus oídos e insista en que la conteste personalmente. -Tras haberse escabullido del dilema con la habilidad que le era característica, el capitán Wragge se levantó con viveza y cogió su sombrero.

- ¡Espere! -rogó Magdalen-. Quiero preguntarle...

- Ni una palabra más -dijo el capitán-. Le he dado ya bastante en que pensar por hoy. Se me ha acabado el tiempo y mi calesa me espera. Salgo de viaje para recorrer el país, como de costumbre. Me dirijo a cultivar el campo de la indigestión pública con la triple reja del arado que forman el áloe, la escamonea y la gutagamba. -Al llegar a la puerta se detuvo y se dio la vuelta-. A propósito, un mensaje de mi desafortunada esposa. Si le permite venir a verla otra vez, la señora Wragge promete solemnemente no perder su zapato de nuevo. Yo no le creo. ¿Qué dice usted? ¿Puede venir?

- Sí, cuando guste -respondió Magdalen-. Si algún día me repongo, ¿podrá venir la señora Wragge y quedarse conmigo?

- Desde luego, querida. Si no tiene usted nada que objetar, le proporcionaré de antemano unos cuantos miles de impresos en rojo, azul y amarillo de su propio retrato («Antes de que tomara la píldora, podría haberla derribado con una pluma. ¡Fíjese ahora en ella!»). Con toda seguridad los dejará caer por todas partes allá donde vaya, lo que producirá unos resultados sumamente gratificantes desde el punto de vista de la promoción. No me vea como un mercenario, sencillamente conozco la época en la que vivo. -El capitán se detuvo por segunda vez y de nuevo se dio la vuelta en el umbral de la puerta-. Se ha portado usted extraordinariamente bien -dijo-, y merece una recompensa. Le daré una última información antes de irme. ¿Ha oído a alguien preguntar por usted al otro lado de la puerta en los últimos dos días? Ah, veo que sí. Pues escuche. Era el señor Kirke. -El capitán se alejó con el paso ágil de siempre. Magdalen oyó cómo se daba publicidad con la enfermera antes de cerrar la puerta-. Si alguna vez se lo preguntan -dijo en un susurro confidencial-, el nombre es Wragge y la píldora se vende en pulcras cajitas al precio de trece peniques y medio, timbre incluido. Tome usted unos cuantos ejemplares del retrato de una enferma a la que podría haber derribado con una pluma antes de que tomara la píldora; se le pide simplemente que le eche un vistazo ahora. Muchas gracias. Buenos días.

La puerta se cerró y Magdalen volvió a quedarse a solas. Pero no se sentía sola; el capitán Wragge le había dado algo nuevo en que pensar. Hora tras hora, sus pensamientos giraron en torno al señor Kirke con curiosidad hasta que llegó la noche y volvió a oír su voz a través de la puerta entreabierta.

- Le estoy muy agradecida -le dijo, antes de que la enfermera pudiera responder a las preguntas del marino-, muy, muy agradecida por su bondad.

- Procure ponerse bien -replicó él afablemente desde el otro lado-. Me sentiré más que recompensado si procura ponerse bien.

A la mañana siguiente, el señor Merrick la halló impaciente por abandonar el lecho y trasladarse al sofá de la salita. El cirujano dijo que suponía que deseaba un cambio.

- Sí -replicó ella-. Deseo ver al señor Kirke.

El señor Merrick consintió en trasladarla al día siguiente, pero le prohibió terminantemente que se inquietara aún más viendo al señor Kirke o a cualquier otra persona hasta el otro día. Magdalen intentó protestar; el señor Merrick permaneció imperturbable. Cuando el cirujano se fue, Magdalen intentó persuadir a la enfermera; la enfermera se mostró imperturbable también.

Al día siguiente la envolvieron en chales, la llevaron al sofá e improvisaron allí una cama. En la mesita cercana había unas flores y un número de un periódico ilustrado. Inmediatamente Magdalen preguntó quién lo había puesto allí. La enfermera (que no percibió la mirada de advertencia del médico) dijo que el señor Kirke había pensado que a ella le gustarían las flores y que las imágenes de los periódicos podrían distraerla. Al oír esta respuesta, la impaciencia de Magdalen por ver al señor Kirke se volvió absolutamente incontenible y el señor Merrick se vio obligado a ir de inmediato en su busca.

Magdalen miró con avidez la puerta que se abría. Su primera impresión cuando lo vio entrar suscitó la duda de si era la primera vez que veía aquella figura alta y aquel rostro franco y tostado por el sol. Pero estaba demasiado débil y agitada para seguir el hilo de sus recuerdos hasta Aldborough. Abandonó el intento y se limitó a mirarlo. Kirke se detuvo a los pies del sofá y dijo unas cuantas palabras de ánimo. Ella le hizo señas para que se acercara y le ofreció su mano enflaquecida. Kirke la tomó con dulzura y se sentó junto a ella. Ambos guardaron silencio. El rostro del marino comunicó a Magdalen el pesar y la simpatía que su silencio hubiera ocultado. Magdalen siguió cogida de su mano -conscientemente ahora- con la misma persistencia con que se había aferrado a ella el día de su encuentro. Cerró los ojos tras un vano esfuerzo por hablarle y las lágrimas le rodaron lentamente por las mejillas macilentas.

El cirujano hizo señas a Kirke de que aguardara y le diera tiempo para recobrarse. Magdalen consiguió serenarse un tanto y lo miró.

- ¡Qué bueno ha sido usted conmigo! -murmuró-. ¡Y qué poco he hecho yo para merecerlo!

- ¡Calle, calle! -dijo él-. No sabe usted lo feliz que me ha hecho poder ayudarla.

El sonido de la voz de Kirke pareció dar fuerzas y valor a Magdalen. Lo miró con ávido interés, con una gratitud que espontáneamente pasaba por alto todas las reservas convencionales que se interponían entre un hombre y una mujer.

- ¿Dónde me había visto antes de encontrarme aquí? -preguntó Magdalen de repente.

Kirke vaciló. El señor Merrick acudió en su ayuda.

- Le prohíbo decir una sola palabra sobre el pasado al señor Kirke -dijo- y le prohíbo al señor Kirke que se la diga a usted. Hoy empieza usted una nueva vida; los únicos recuerdos que autorizo son los de hace cinco minutos.

Magdalen miró al cirujano y sonrió.

- Debo hacerle una pregunta -dijo, y de nuevo volvió el rostro hacia Kirke-. ¿Es cierto que sólo me había visto una vez antes de venir a esta casa?

- ¡Completamente cierto! -Kirke contestó con un súbito rubor que ella detectó al instante. Los ojos de Magdalen se animaron y miraron al marino con mayor seriedad al hacerle una nueva pregunta.

- ¿Cómo es que me recordaba si sólo me había visto una vez?

La mano de Kirke se cerró inconscientemente alrededor de la de Magdalen y la oprimió por primera vez. Intentó responder y titubeó en la primera palabra.

- Tengo buena memoria -respondió al fin, y apartó la vista de repente con una turbación tan ajena a su aplomo habitual que tanto el señor Merrick como la enfermera la advirtieron.

Magdalen notó aquella momentánea presión de la mano con todos los nervios de su cuerpo, con la exquisita sensibilidad que acompaña a los primeros pasos vacilantes en el camino hacia la salud. Magdalen vio el rubor de Kirke y oyó sus palabras titubeantes con la sensible percepción de su edad y de su sexo, aguzada para descubrir intuitivamente la verdad. En el momento en que Kirke apartó la vista de ella, Magdalen se soltó suavemente de su mano y volvió la cabeza sobre la almohada. «¿Es posible? -pensó con un delicioso temor que hacía palpitar más deprisa su corazón, con un rubor de deliciosa turbación que encendía sus mejillas-. ¿Es posible?»

El cirujano hizo otra seña a Kirke. Éste la comprendió y se levantó inmediatamente. La alteración momentánea de su rostro y sus maneras había desaparecido. Kirke estaba convencido de que había conseguido mantener su secreto y el alivio de esta convicción le había hecho recobrar la serenidad.

- Adiós, hasta mañana -dijo al salir de la habitación.

- Adiós -respondió Magdalen en voz baja, sin mirarle.

El señor Merrick ocupó la silla que había abandonado Kirke y buscó el pulso de Magdalen.

- Lo que me temía -dijo-. Demasiado rápido.

- ¡No! -exclamó Magdalen, apartando la muñeca con gesto malhumorado-. ¡Por favor, no me toque!

El señor Merrick cedió su sitio a la enfermera jovialmente.

- Volveré dentro de media hora -le susurró- para llevarla de vuelta a la cama. No la deje hablar. Muéstrele las imágenes del periódico y manténgala tranquila.

Cuando regresó el señor Merrick, la enfermera le informó de que el periódico no había sido necesario. La conducta de la paciente había sido ejemplar. No había demostrado la menor agitación ni había pronunciado una sola palabra.

Los días se sucedieron y el señor Merrick le permitía pasar cada vez más tiempo en la salita. Pronto Magdalen pudo prescindir de la cama en el sofá; pudo vestirse y sentarse en un sillón, apoyada en almohadones. Sus horas de emancipación del dormitorio constituían el gran acontecimiento diario de su vida. Eran las horas que pasaba en compañía de Kirke.

Magdalen tenía ahora un doble interés en él, en el hombre cuya protección le había salvado la razón y la vida, en el hombre cuyo más recóndito y preciado secreto había descubierto. Poco a poco se sintieron tan cómodos el uno con el otro como dos viejos amigos; poco a poco, Magdalen abusó de todos sus privilegios y llegó a conocer íntimamente el carácter de Kirke sin que éste lo sospechara.

Magdalen preguntaba sin cesar. Le sonsacaba con delicadeza y sin que él se diera cuenta todo cuanto pudiera decirle sobre sí mismo y sobre su vida. Él, el menos presuntuoso de los hombres, se convirtió en un egotista en sus diestras manos. Magdalen descubrió el orgullo que sentía por su barco y se aprovechó de él sin remordimientos. Le incitó a hablar de las excelencias del navío y de las maravillas que había hecho en situaciones desesperadas como no había hablado en toda su vida a ser vivo alguno sobre la tierra. Magdalen averiguó inquietudes personales e indescriptibles

regocijos de su vida como marino que ni siquiera había compartido con su piloto. Observó su rostro encendido con la deliciosa y triunfal sensación de estar añadiendo leña al fuego; le tendió trampas que le hicieron olvidar, en el fervor de sus explicaciones, toda consideración hacia el momento y el lugar y dar un golpe en la desvencijada mesita de la casa de huéspedes con la misma fuerza que si su mano hubiera descendido sobre la sólida borda de su barco. La confusión de Kirke al descubrir su descuido deleitaba a Magdalen secretamente; ésta habría gritado de alegría cuando él se preguntaba con aire penitente en qué podía estar pensando.

Otras veces, Magdalen le hacía abandonar el tema de los placeres de su vida y le incitaba a hablar de sus peligros: los de aquella celosa amante, el mar, que había absorbido buena parte de su existencia, que lo había mantenido extrañamente inocente e ignorante del mundo. Kirke había naufragado dos veces. Innumerables eran las ocasiones en que él y los que le rodeaban habían sufrido la amenaza de la muerte y escapado a su destino por los pelos. Al principio siempre se mostraba reacio a hablar de la parte más oscura y horrible de su vida; sólo después de que Magdalen le tentara con destreza tendiéndole pequeñas celadas en su charla, conseguía impulsarle a hablar de los terrores de las profundidades. Magdalen le escuchaba con interés, conteniendo el aliento, mirándole maravillada, mientras las terroríficas historias surgían de sus labios, doblemente vividas por la sencillez con que las contaba. La noble inconsciencia de su propio heroísmo, la cándida modestia con la que describía sus propios actos de intrépida resistencia y abnegado valor, sin que por su cabeza cruzara la idea de que fueran algo más que el simple cumplimiento de las obligaciones de la vocación que había elegido: todo ello lo elevó a un lugar en la estimación de Magdalen tan desesperadamente por encima de ella que se mostraba inquieta e impaciente hasta que, después de encumbrar al ídolo, lo volvía a bajar. Era en esas ocasiones cuando exigía de él todas las pequeñas atenciones familiares que tanto valoran las mujeres en su relación con los hombres. «Esta mano -pensaba Magdalen con un exquisito deleite en seguir secretamente la idea mientras lo tenía cerca de ella-. Esta mano, que ha rescatado a los que se ahogaban de la muerte, arregla mis almohadones con tanta ternura que apenas lo noto. Esta mano, que ha aferrado a hombres enloquecidos y amotinados y los ha obligado a cumplir con su deber por la fuerza, está mezclando mi limonada y pelando mi fruta con mayor delicadeza y pulcritud que si lo hiciera yo misma. Oh, si pudiera ser un hombre, ¡cómo me gustaría ser igual que él!»

Mientras estaba en su presencia, Magdalen no dejaba que sus pensamientos avanzaran más allá de ese punto. Sólo cuando la noche los separaba se aventuraba a dejar que sus pensamientos derivaran hacia la sacrificada devoción que tan compasivamente la había salvado. Nada sabía Kirke de lo que pensaba Magdalen sobre él en la intimidad de su dormitorio durante las tranquilas horas que transcurrían hasta que se quedaba dormida. No sospechaba la influencia que ejercía sobre ella ni el aliento que daba a aquella nueva vida, que la novedad de la conciencia recobrada había vuelto tan sensible a todas las impresiones. «No tiene a nadie más que la distraiga, pobrecilla -solía pensar Kirke con tristeza, sentado a solas en su pequeño dormitorio del segundo piso-. Si un hombre rudo como yo puede aliviar el paso monótono del tiempo hasta que lleguen sus amigos, todo lo que yo pueda contarle está a su disposición.»

Siempre que se quedaba solo, Kirke se sentía abatido e inquieto. Poco a poco adquirió el hábito de dar largos paseos por la noche, cuando Magdalen creía que estaba durmiendo en el piso de arriba. En una ocasión se marchó bruscamente durante el día, por unos asuntos, dijo. La noche del día anterior la conversación con Magdalen le había llevado a preguntarle su edad. «Veinte años cumplidos -pensó Kirke-. Réstale veinte a cuarenta y uno. Una resta fácil, tan fácil que podría hacerla mi sobrino.» Fue caminando hasta la dársena y contempló los barcos con amargura. «No debo olvidar cómo son los barcos -se dijo-. No pasará mucho tiempo antes de que vuelva de nuevo al trabajo.» Abandonó la dársena y fue a visitar a un camarada de la marina, un hombre casado. En el curso de la conversación, Kirke le preguntó cuántos años le llevaba a su mujer. Había seis años de diferencia entre ellos.

- Supongo que ya es bastante -dijo Kirke.

- Sí -dijo su amigo-. Más que suficiente. ¿Estás buscando mujer por fin? Prueba con una

mujer madura de treinta y cinco. Ésa es tu marca, Kirke, según mis cálculos.

El tiempo pasó deprisa y sin incidentes; el tiempo presente, que para ella era de un feliz restablecimiento y para él empezaba ya a ser motivo de desconfianza.

Una mañana temprano, el señor Merrick visitó inesperadamente a Kirke en su cuarto del segundo piso.

- Ayer llegué a la conclusión -dijo el cirujano, entrando directamente en materia- de que nuestra enferma está ya lo bastante fuerte para que corramos el riesgo de ponernos en contacto con sus allegados. En consecuencia, he seguido la pista que ese extraño individuo, el capitán Wragge, puso en nuestras manos. ¿Recuerda que nos aconsejó acudir al señor Pendril, el abogado? Hace dos día fui a verlo y él me remitió (no de tan buena gana como yo creía) a una tal señorita Garth. Ella me contó lo suficiente para convencerme de que la cautela con la que hemos obrado era necesaria. Es una historia tristísima, y me siento obligado a decir que yo, personalmente, soy muy indulgente con la pobre muchacha del piso de abajo. Su única pariente en el mundo es su hermana mayor. He sugerido que la hermana debería escribirle primero, y luego, si la carta no le causa ningún perjuicio, que podría venir a verla dentro de un par de días. No he dado la dirección para evitar que la visiten sin mi permiso. No he hecho más que comprometerme a entregar la carta, que seguramente encontraré en mi casa cuando vuelva. ¿Podría esperar usted a que le envíe a mi criado con ella? A mí me será totalmente imposible traérsela. Lo único que debe hacer usted es esperar una oportunidad en que ella no esté en la salita y poner la carta donde pueda verla cuando entre. La letra de la dirección le dirá de quién es antes de que la abra. No le diga nada, procure que la patrona esté cerca y déjela sola. Sé que puedo confiar en que obedecerá usted mis instrucciones y por eso le pido que nos haga este servicio. Parece usted alicaído esta mañana. Es lógico. Está acostumbrado a vivir al aire libre, capitán, y empieza a languidecer en este lugar cerrado.

- ¿Me permite hacerle una pregunta, doctor? ¿Está languideciendo ella también en este lugar cerrado? Cuando venga su hermana, ¿se la llevará con ella?

- Desde luego, si sigue mi consejo. Dentro de una semana o menos estará lo bastante recuperada para trasladarse. Definitivamente está usted muy alicaído y tiene las manos ardiendo. Añora usted el azul del mar, capitán. ¡Añora el azul del mar! -El cirujano se fue tras expresar esta opinión.

La carta llegó una hora más tarde. Kirke la recibió de manos de la patrona con reticencia y casi con rudeza, sin mirarla. Averiguó que Magdalen aún se estaba vistiendo y tras explicar a la patrona la necesidad de que se hallara a su disposición si la llamaba, bajó al primer piso de inmediato y dejó la carta sobre la mesa de la salita.

Magdalen oyó el sonido de los pasos familiares.

- Estaré lista en seguida -dijo a través de la puerta cerrada.

Kirke no contestó; cogió su sombrero y salió de la casa. Después de un instante de vacilación, encaminó sus pasos hacia el este y fue a ver a los armadores que lo contrataban a su oficina de Cornhill.

CAPÍTULO III

La primera mirada de Magdalen a la habitación vacía le descubrió la carta sobre la mesa. Tal como había predicho el cirujano, la dirección le reveló el remitente en cuanto vio la letra.

Ni un solo sonido escapó de su garganta. Se sentó junto a la mesa, pálida y silenciosa, con la carta en el regazo. Intentó abrirla por dos veces y la dos veces la volvió a dejar. El pasado no estaba solo en sus pensamientos mientras miraba la letra de su hermana; el miedo a Kirke también estaba allí. «¡Mi vida pasada! -pensó-. ¿Qué pensará de mí cuando conozca mi vida pasada?»

Hizo un nuevo esfuerzo y rompió el sello. Una segunda carta cayó del sobre, dirigida a ella con una letra que no le era familiar. Dejó esta segunda carta a un lado y leyó las líneas que le había escrito Norah.

Ventnor, isla de Wight, 24 de agosto

Mi queridísima Magdalen:

Cuando leas esta carta intenta pensar que fue ayer cuando nos vimos por última vez y aparta de tus pensamientos (como yo lo he hecho con los míos) el pasado y cuanto a él se refiere.

Me han prohibido tajantemente que te altere o te canse con una carta demasiado larga. ¿Está mal que te diga que soy la mujer más feliz del mundo? Espero que no, pues no puedo guardar el secreto.

Cariño, prepárate para la mayor sorpresa que te he dado en toda mi vida. Me he casado. Hoy hace sólo una semana que me despedí de mi antiguo nombre, una semana sólo desde que me convertí en la feliz esposa de George Bartram de St. Crux.

Ciertos obstáculos se interpusieron en nuestro matrimonio al principio, me temo que algunos de ellos por mi culpa. Afortunadamente para mí, mi marido sabía desde el principio que le amaba; me dio una segunda oportunidad para decírselo después de haber perdido la primera y, como puedes ver, tuve la sensatez de aprovecharla. Deberías estar especialmente interesada en este matrimonio, cariño, pues tú has sido la causa. De no haber ido yo a Aldborough en busca de algún indicio sobre tu paradero, de no haber sido porque circunstancias en las que tú estabas envuelta llevaron allí a George al mismo tiempo, quizá mi marido y yo no hubiéramos llegado a conocernos. Cuando George y yo recordamos aquellos primeros días, te recordamos a ti.

Debo mantener mi promesa de no cansarte, debo poner punto y final a esta carta (totalmente en contra de mi voluntad). ¡Paciencia, paciencia!, pronto nos veremos. George y yo iremos a buscarte a Londres para traerte con nosotros a Ventnor. Piensa que esta invitación no sólo te la hago yo, sino también mi marido. No creas, Magdalen, que me casé con él hasta que le enseñé a pensar de ti lo mismo que pienso yo, a desear lo que deseo y a esperar lo que yo espero. Podría decir mucho más sobre esto, mucho más sobre George, si diera rienda suelta a mis pensamientos y a mi pluma; pero debo dejar a la señorita Garth (a petición suya) un espacio en blanco en la última página de esta carta; así pues, tan sólo añadiré unas palabras más antes de despedirme para prevenirte de que me reservo otra sorpresa hasta que nos veamos. No intentes adivinarla; podrías pasarte años sin acercarte en lo más mínimo a la verdad.

Con todo el cariño de tu hermana,

NORAH BARTRAM

(AÑADIDO POR LA SEÑORITA GARTH)

Mi querida niña:

Si alguna vez hubiera llegado a perder el cariñoso recuerdo que tengo de ti, volvería a brotar de nuevo en mi corazón ahora que sé que Dios ha querido devolverte a nosotros desde el borde de la tumba. Añado estas líneas a la carta de tu hermana, pues no estoy segura de que te encuentres tan bien como ella cree para aceptar su propuesta. No ha dicho una sola palabra sobre ella o sobre su marido que no sea cierta. Pero el señor Bartram es un extraño para ti, y si crees poder restablecerte de un modo más cómodo y agradable bajo la protección de tu vieja institutriz que bajo la de tu nuevo cuñado, ven primero conmigo y confía en que habré de convencer a Norah del cambio de planes. He apalabrado la opción a una casita de campo en Shanklin, lo bastante cerca de tu hermana para permitir que os veáis siempre que gustéis, y al mismo tiempo lo bastante lejos para garantizarte el privilegio de estar a solas cuando lo desees. Mándame unas líneas antes de que nos encontremos para decir sí o no. Yo mandaré aviso a Shanklin en el próximo correo.

Con todo el cariño de,

La carta se deslizó de la mano de Magdalen. Pensamientos que no había tenido jamás acudieron a ella en aquel momento.

Norah, cuyo valor ante la desgracia inmerecida había sido el valor de la resignación; Norah, que había aceptado pacientemente su triste suerte; que, de principio a fin, no había planeado venganza alguna ni se había rebajado a ningún tipo de engaño; Norah había alcanzado el objetivo que su hermana, con todo su ingenio, con toda su resolución y su audacia, no había logrado. Abierta y honorablemente, enamorados ambos, Norah se había casado con el hombre que poseía el dinero de Combe-Raven. ¡La intriga de Magdalen para recuperarlo sólo había servido para abrir el camino que acabaría reuniendo a marido y mujer!

A la luz de este abrumador descubrimiento, la vieja contienda resurgió; y el Bien y el Mal combatieron una vez más por hacerse con ella, pero esta vez algunas fuerzas se añadieron a su lado mejor: el aliento que había recibido su nueva vida, el sentido más noble que había crecido parejo a la gratitud hacia el hombre que la había salvado. Todos los impulsos más elevados de su naturaleza, los que jamás le habían permitido errar con impunidad, los que la habían torturado antes y después de su matrimonio con los remordimientos que ninguna mujer despiadada y malvada por naturaleza puede sentir; todos los elementos más nobles de su carácter aunaron sus fuerzas para el combate final y le dieron arrestos para afrontar sin acobardarse indignamente la revelación que se abría ante sus ojos. A la luz de su propia vida inmortal, la verdad se alzaba cada vez con mayor claridad de las cenizas de sus pasiones muertas, de la tumba de sus esperanzas enterradas. Cuando volvió a mirar la carta, cuando leyó una vez más que la recuperación de la fortuna perdida era un triunfo de su hermana, no de ella, Magdalen ya había pisoteado victoriosamente los pequeños celos y las excusas mezquinas y pudo decir con el corazón en la mano: «¡Norah se lo ha merecido!».

Pasaron las horas. Magdalen siguió absorta en sus pensamientos y sin prestar atención a la segunda carta, que no había abierto todavía, hasta el regreso de Kirke.

El marino se detuvo en el rellano frente a la puerta y, entreabriéndola apenas, sin entrar en la habitación, preguntó a Magdalen si necesitaba alguna cosa. Magdalen le rogó que

entrara. Kirke tenía el rostro cansado; parecía más viejo de lo que Magdalen había visto hasta entonces.

- ¿Ha puesto usted esta carta aquí para mí? -preguntó Magdalen.

- Sí. Me lo ha pedido el doctor.

- Supongo que el doctor le dijo que era de mi hermana. Ella y la señorita Garth van a venir a verme. Ellas le darán las gracias por todas sus bondades hacia mí mejor que yo.

- No tengo derecho a su agradecimiento -replicó él con seriedad-. Lo que he hecho no lo he hecho por ellas, sino por usted. -Kirke esperó un momento y la miró. Su rostro le habría traicionado en aquella mirada, su voz le habría traicionado en las siguientes palabras que pronunció, de no haber sido porque ella ya había adivinado la verdad.

- Cuando vengan sus amigos -dijo él-, supongo que se la llevarán a un lugar mejor que éste.

- No pueden llevarme a lugar alguno -dijo ella con tono afable- del que pueda pensar lo que pienso del lugar en que usted me encontró. No pueden llevarme con un amigo más querido que el amigo que ha salvado mi vida.

Se produjo un silencio momentáneo.

- Hemos sido muy felices aquí -prosiguió él, con un tono cada vez más bajo-. ¿No me olvidará cuando nos hayamos dicho adiós?

Magdalen palideció cuando oyó esas palabras y, levantándose de la silla, se arrodilló junto a la mesa para alzar los ojos hacia el rostro de Kirke y obligarle a mirarla.

- ¿Por qué dice eso? -preguntó-. No vamos a decirnos adiós; todavía no, al menos.

- Creía... -empezó él.

- ¿Sí?

- Creía que sus amigos venían para...

- ¿Cree de verdad que voy a irme con alguien -dijo Magdalen, interrumpiéndole con vehemencia-, aunque sea el familiar más querido que tengo en el mundo, dejándole a usted aquí, sin preocuparme y sin saber si iba a volver a verle o no? ¡Oh, no piense eso de mí! -exclamó con lágrimas ardientes en los ojos-, ¡Estoy segura de que no piensa eso de mí!

- No -dijo él-, jamás he pensado y jamás podré pensar nada injusto o indigno de usted.

Antes de que pudiera añadir nada más, Magdalen se alejó de la mesa tan súbitamente como se había acercado a ella y regresó a su silla. La respuesta de Kirke le había recordado inconscientemente la cruel necesidad que seguía pendiente: la necesidad de contarle la historia del pasado. Por la cabeza de Magdalen no pasó en ningún momento la idea de ocultarle aquella historia. «¿Me amará cuando sepa la verdad como me ama ahora?» Éste era su único pensamiento cuando abordó el asunto en su presencia sin echarse atrás.

- Olvidemos ahora mis sentimientos -dijo-. Hay una razón para que no me vaya antes de tener la seguridad de que volveré a verle. Tiene usted derecho, más derecho que ninguna otra persona, a saber cómo llegué hasta aquí, perdida para mis parientes y amigos, y por qué había caído tan bajo cuando me encontró.

- No tengo ningún derecho -se apresuró a decir él-. No deseo saber nada que le aflija contarme.

- Usted ha cumplido siempre con su deber -replicó Magdalen con una débil sonrisa-. Déjeme seguir su ejemplo, si puedo, e intentar cumplir con el mío.

- Tengo edad suficiente para ser su padre -dijo él con amargura-. El deber es más fácil de cumplir a mi edad que a la suya.

La cuestión de la edad ocupaba los pensamientos de Kirke de un modo tan obsesivo que imaginaba que a Magdalen debía de ocurrirle igual. Ella ni siquiera lo había pensado. La referencia que Kirke acababa de hacer a la edad no la apartó en lo más mínimo del tema sobre el que quería hablarle.

- No sabe usted cuánto valoro la buena opinión que tiene de mí -dijo Magdalen, esforzándose denodadamente por mantener su debilitado coraje-. ¿Cómo puedo merecer su bondad, cómo puedo creer que soy digna de su estima hasta que le haya abierto mi corazón? ¡Oh, no dé alas a mi miserable debilidad! ¡Ayúdeme a contarle la verdad, oblígueme a hacerlo por mi propio bien si no es por el suyo!

A Kirke le conmovió profundamente la ferviente sinceridad de aquella súplica.

- Cuéntela -dijo-. Tiene usted razón, y yo estaba equivocado. -Aguardó un momento y reflexionó-. ¿Le sería más fácil escribirla que contarla? -preguntó al fin con una delicada consideración hacia Magdalen.

- Mucho más fácil -respondió Magdalen, aferrándose a la sugerencia con agradecimiento-. Podré estar más segura de mí misma, podré estar segura de que no le ocultaré nada, si lo escribo. ¡Pero usted no me escriba! -añadió de pronto, comprendiendo con la instintiva y veloz perspicacia de una mujer el peligro que corría renunciando a su influencia personal sobre él-. Espere a que nos veamos y dígame lo que piensa de sus propios labios.

- ¿Dónde quiere que se lo diga?

- ¡Aquí! -respondió ella con vehemencia-. Aquí, donde me halló desamparada, aquí, donde me ha devuelto a la vida y donde he aprendido a conocerle. Podré soportar las palabras más duras si me las dice en esta habitación. Es imposible que esté fuera más de un mes; un mes será más que suficiente. Si vuelvo... -Se interrumpió, confusa-. Sólo pienso en mí misma cuando debería pensar en usted. Tiene sus propias ocupaciones y sus propios amigos. ¿Quiere decidir por los dos? ¿Dirá usted cómo ha de ser?

- Será como usted desee. Si vuelve dentro de un mes, aquí me encontrará.

- ¿No supondrá ningún sacrificio para su comodidad o para sus planes?

- No supondrá nada más que un viaje de vuelta a la City -respondió él. Se levantó y cogió su sombrero-. Ahora debo salir para allá inmediatamente -añadió- o no llegaré a tiempo.

- ¿Es una promesa? -dijo Magdalen y extendió la mano.

- Sí -respondió él con cierta tristeza-. Es una promesa.

Aun siendo leve, la sombra de melancolía que mostraban sus maneras afligió a Magdalen. Olvidando sus otras preocupaciones en su ansiedad por animarle, Magdalen apretó suavemente la mano que le tendía. «Si esto no le dice la verdad, no lo hará nada», pensó.

No consiguió decirle la verdad, pero obligó a Kirke a plantearse una pregunta que no se había atrevido a hacerse hasta entonces. «¿Es su gratitud o su amor lo que me habla? -se preguntó-. Si por ventura yo fuera más joven, podría esperar que fuera su amor.» Aquella terrible diferencia que se planteó por primera vez el día en que ella le dijo su edad empezó a obsesionarle de nuevo cuando abandonó la casa. Durante todo el trayecto hasta la oficina de los armadores fue restando veinte de cuarenta y uno a intervalos.

Cuando se quedó sola, Magdalen se acercó a la mesa para escribir la respuesta que solicitaba la señorita Garth aceptando con gratitud su proposición.

La segunda carta, que antes había dejado a un lado y había olvidado, fue el primer objeto que atrajo su atención al cambiar de sitio. La abrió inmediatamente y buscó la firma, dado que no reconocía la letra. Con indescriptible asombro su remitente resultó ser nada menos que... ¡el viejo señor Clare!

La carta del filósofo prescindía de toda fórmula de cortesía para entrar en materia sin preámbulos de ninguna clase y con total inflexibilidad.

Tengo más noticias para ti de ese canalla despreciable que es mi hijo. Aquí están descritas con la mayor brevedad posible.

Si lo recuerdas, siempre te dije que Frank era un cobarde escurridizo. La primera pista que se ha tenido de él después de que huyera de sus jefes en la China lo presenta bajo ese mismo carácter. ¿Dónde crees que ha aparecido? Pues oculto tras un par de toneles de harina a bordo de un navío inglés que volvía a Londres desde Hong-Kong.

El nombre del barco era *Liberación* y su capitán un tal Kirke. En lugar de actuar como un hombre sensato y arrojar a Frank por la borda, el capitán Kirke fue lo bastante estúpido para escuchar su historia. Frank sacó el máximo partido de sus desventuras, de eso puedes estar segura. Estaba medio muerto de hambre; era un inglés perdido en un país extranjero sin un solo amigo que lo ayudara; su única oportunidad de volver a casa era meterse a escondidas en la bodega de un navío inglés, y eso había hecho dos días atrás en Hong-Kong. Ésa fue su historia. Cualquier otro capitán habría mandado colgar inmediatamente a cualquier otro patán en la situación de Frank. Naturalmente, aunque no merecía la compasión de nadie, fue mimado y compadecido en el acto. El capitán lo tomó bajo su protección, la tripulación sintió lástima de él y los pasajeros le dieron palmaditas en la espalda. Le alimentaron y vistieron, y le regalaron el pasaje de vuelta a casa. Es mucha suerte, dirás. Nada de eso; nada es bastante para mi despreciable hijo.

El barco hizo escala en el cabo de Buena Esperanza. Entre sus otros desatinos, el capitán Kirke admitió a una pasajera a bordo en aquel lugar. No era una mujer joven, ni mucho menos, sino la vieja viuda de un colono rico. ¿Es necesario que diga que inmediatamente se interesó muchísimo por Frank y sus desgracias? ¿Es necesario que te cuente lo que siguió? Repasa la carrera de mi hijo y verás que lo que siguió estaba de acuerdo con lo que había ocurrido antes. Frank no merecía el interés de tu pobre padre en él, y lo tuvo. No merecía tu cariño, y lo tuvo. No merecía el mejor puesto en una de las mejores oficinas de Londres, y lo tuvo; no merecía una oportunidad igualmente buena en una de las mejores casas mercantiles de la China; no merecía comida, ropa, compasión y un pasaje gratuito de vuelta a casa, y todo ello lo obtuvo. Por último, pero no menos importante, ni siquiera merecía casarse con una mujer lo bastante vieja para ser su abuela, ¡y lo ha hecho! No hace ni cinco minutos que he mandado tirar sus participaciones de boda al pozo ciego y he arrojado al fuego la carta que las acompañaba. La última información que contiene la carta es que su mujer y él están buscando una finca que les convenga. ¡Fíjate bien en lo que te digo! Frank conseguirá una de las mejores propiedades de Inglaterra; naturalmente le seguirá un escaño en la Cámara de los Comunes y, a continuación, uno de los legisladores de este país gobernado por asnos será ¡el señor patán en persona!

Si eres la muchacha sensata que siempre he creído que eras, hace tiempo que habrás aprendido a valorar a Frank en su justa medida, y las noticias que te envío sólo servirán para confirmar el desprecio que sientes por él. ¡Ojalá tu pobre padre viviera para ver este día! Muy a menudo he echado de menos a mi viejo charlatán, pero jamás había sentido su pérdida con tanta intensidad como cuando llegaron las participaciones de boda y la carta de Frank a esta casa.

Tu amigo, si alguna vez necesitas uno,

FRANCIS CLARE, PADRE

Magdalen leyó la carta de cabo a rabo, momentáneamente perturbada su tranquilidad por la aparición del nombre de Kirke en el singular relato del señor Clare. Los días en que podía haberle causado dolor habían quedado atrás; hacía mucho tiempo que se le había caído la venda de los ojos. El propio señor Clare se hubiera sentido satisfecho de ver el tranquilo desprecio con que Magdalen dejó a un lado su carta. El único pensamiento serio que le dedicó concernía a Kirke. La indiferencia con que el capitán se había referido, en su presencia, a los pasajeros de su barco sin mencionar a ninguno por su nombre le demostraba que Frank debía de haber guardado silencio sobre el compromiso que una vez existiera entre ellos. Tendría que ser ella quien hiciera la confesión de aquella ilusión desvanecida como parte de la historia del pasado que se había comprometido a revelar.

Escribió a la señorita Garth y envió la carta al correo inmediatamente.

A la mañana siguiente recibió unas líneas de respuesta. La señorita Garth había escrito para alquilar la casita de campo de Shanklin y el señor Merrick había autorizado que Magdalen se trasladara al día siguiente. Norah sería la primera en llegar a la casa y la seguiría la señorita Garth con un cómodo carruaje en el que transportar a la enferma hasta el ferrocarril. Se habían previsto cuantas disposiciones le fueran útiles: ella sólo tendría que realizar el esfuerzo de moverse.

Magdalen leyó la carta con agradecimiento, pero sus pensamientos terminaron por alejarse y seguir a Kirke en su regreso a la City. ¿Cuál era ese asunto que le había llevado hasta allí ya por la mañana? ¿Y por qué la promesa que habían intercambiado le obligaba a volver a la City por segunda vez en un día?

¿Sería por casualidad algún asunto relacionado con el mar? ¿Le habían tentado los armadores para que volviera a su barco?

CAPÍTULO IV

La primera emoción del encuentro entre las hermanas había pasado; las primeras impresiones vividas, entre placenteras y dolorosas, se habían apaciguado; Norah y Magdalen estaban sentadas, cogidas de la mano, extasiadas ambas en la silenciosa plenitud de su dicha. Magdalen fue la primera en hablar.

- ¿Tienes algo que decirme, Norah?

- Tengo mil cosas que decirte, cariño, y tú tienes diez mil que contarme a mí. ¿Te refieres a esa segunda sorpresa de la que te hablaba en mi carta?

- Sí. Supongo que debe de incumbirme muy de cerca, de lo contrario no hubieras pensado en mencionarlo en tu primera carta.

- Sí, te concierne muy de cerca. ¿Has oído hablar de la casa de George en Essex? Te resultará familiar al menos el nombre de St. Crux... ¿A qué viene ese sobresalto, querida? Me temo que aún no estás lo bastante fuerte para recibir más sorpresas.

- Más que fuerte, Norah. Pero tengo algo que decirte sobre St. Crux. También yo tengo una sorpresa para ti.

- ¿Quieres decírmela ahora?

- Ahora no. La sabrás cuando estemos a orillas del mar. La sabrás antes de que acepte la amabilidad con la que he sido invitada a la casa de tu marido.

- ¿Qué puede ser? ¿Por qué no me lo dices ahora mismo?

- Tú solías darme ejemplo de paciencia, Norah, en los viejos tiempos. ¿Querrás darme ejemplo ahora?

- De todo corazón. ¿Vuelvo entonces a mi propia historia? ¿Sí? Entonces volvamos a ella ahora mismo. Te decía que St. Crux es la casa de George en Essex, la casa que heredó de su tío. Sabiendo que la señorita Garth tenía curiosidad por ver el lugar, George dejó instrucciones (antes de irse al extranjero tras la muerte del almirante) de que ella y cualquier amigo que la acompañara fueran admitidos en la casa si por casualidad se hallaba en las cercanías durante su ausencia. La señorita Garth y yo y un numeroso grupo de amigos del señor Tyrrel nos hallábamos en las cercanías poco después de la marcha de George. Nos habían invitado a todos a presenciar la botadura del nuevo yate del señor Tyrrel desde el astillero donde se había construido, en Wivenhoe, Essex. Cuando terminó la botadura, todos los demás volvieron a Colchester para comer. La señorita Garth y yo conseguimos meternos en el mismo carruaje sin otra compañía que la de mis dos pequeñas pupilas. Dimos instrucciones al cochero y pasamos por St. Crux. Nos dejaron pasar en cuanto la señorita Garth mencionó su nombre y nos mostraron toda la casa. No sé cómo describírtela; es el lugar más desconcertante que he visto en mi vida...

- No intentes describirla, Norah. Sigue con la historia.

- Muy bien. Mi historia me lleva directamente a una de las estancias de St. Crux, una habitación casi tan larga como la calle en la que estamos, tan triste, sucia y terriblemente fría que tiemblo sólo de pensarlo. La señorita Garth se disponía a salir de allí con la mayor velocidad posible, igual que yo. Pero el ama de llaves se negó a dejarnos marchar sin antes contemplar un singular mueble, el único que había en aquel inhóspito lugar. Lo llamó trípode, creo. (No hay nada de que alarmarse, Magdalen. ¡Te aseguro que no hay nada de que alarmarse!) En cualquier caso, era una cosa extraña con tres patas que sostenía un gran recipiente lleno de cenizas de carbón. Según los entendidos (y las explicaciones del ama de llaves), estaba considerada como una extraordinaria muestra de metal cincelado; ella resaltó especialmente la belleza de unas

volutas que cubrían el perímetro interior del recipiente con lemas latinos que significaban... lo he olvidado. Yo no tenía el menor interés en aquella cosa, pero examiné de cerca las volutas para contentar al ama de llaves. Para serte sincera, su lección sobre el fino cincelado, aprendida de memoria, resultaba bastante aburrida, y mientras hablaba yo me entretuve en remover las suaves cenizas blancas con la mano, fingiendo escuchar, pero con el pensamiento a kilómetros de distancia. No sé cuánto tiempo llevaba jugando con las cenizas, cuando de repente mis dedos tropezaron con un trozo de papel arrugado oculto a bastante profundidad. Lo saqué a la superficie y resultó ser una carta, una larga carta escrita con letra apretada. ¡Has adivinado mi historia antes de que pueda terminarla, Magdalen! Sabes tan bien como yo que la carta que encontraron mis dedos ociosos era el fideicomiso secreto. Extiende la mano, querida. Tengo permiso de George para mostrártelo, ¡y aquí está!

Norah depositó el fideicomiso en la mano de su hermana. Magdalen lo cogió maquinalmente.

- ¡Tú! -dijo, mirando a su hermana con el recuerdo de todo lo que había arriesgado y sufrido en vano en St. Crux-. ¡Tú lo has encontrado!

- Sí -replicó Norah alegremente-. El fideicomiso ha demostrado no ser una excepción a la terquedad de los objetos perdidos. Búscalos, y seguirán invisibles. ¡Déjalos, y se descubrirán a sí mismos! Tanto tú como tu abogado, Magdalen, teníais razón al suponer que el hallazgo del fideicomiso era de un extraordinario interés para ti. Te ahorraré todos los detalles de nuestras consultas cuando saqué el papel arrugado de las cenizas. Todo terminó en una carta al abogado de George y en que George tuvo que volver del Continente. La señorita Garth y yo lo vimos inmediatamente después de su regreso, e hizo lo que nosotras no podíamos hacer: resolvió el misterio del fideicomiso oculto en las cenizas de carbón. Debes saber que el almirante Bartram estuvo sujeto toda su vida a ataques de sonambulismo. Lo habían encontrado caminando en sueños poco antes de su muerte, justo en la época en la que se hallaba gravemente preocupado por causa de esa misma carta que tienes en la mano. La idea de George es que el almirante debió de imaginar que hacía en sueños lo que despierto no hubiera hecho ni muerto: destruir el fideicomiso. No hacía mucho que se había encendido el fuego en el brasero, y sin duda él lo veía ardiendo aún en sus sueños. Ésta fue la explicación que dio George sobre la extraña ubicación de la carta cuando yo la descubrí. A continuación se planteó la cuestión de qué debía hacerse con la carta en sí, cosa difícil de entender para una mujer. Pero resolví dominarla y la dominé, puesto que se relacionaba contigo.

- Permíteme que yo intente dominarla a mi vez -dijo Magdalen-. Tengo una razón especial para desear saber tanto sobre la carta como tú misma. ¿Qué ha hecho por los demás?, ¿qué hará por mí?

- Mi querida Magdalen, ¡qué modo más extraño de mirarla!, ¡qué modo más extraño de hablar de ella! Por despreciable que parezca, este pedazo de papel te da una fortuna.

- ¿No tengo más derecho a esa fortuna que el que me da esta carta?

- Sí, sólo la carta te da ese derecho. ¿Quieres que intente explicártelo en pocas palabras? En opinión del abogado, la carta en sí podría haberse convertido en objeto de litigio, aunque estoy convencida de que George no lo hubiera autorizado. Considerada, empero, junto con la postdata que le añadió el almirante Bartram (la verás si miras bajo la firma en la tercera página), vincula a los ejecutores testamentarios del almirante tanto moral como legalmente. He agotado mi pequeña reserva de tecnicismos legales y tendré que continuar con mis propias palabras. El resultado se resume como sigue: Todo el dinero volvió a la heredad del señor Noel Vanstone (¡otro tecnicismo! Mi vocabulario es más rico de lo que yo creía) por la sencilla razón de que no se había utilizado como indicaba el señor Noel Vanstone. Si la señora Girdlestone viviera, o si George se hubiera casado conmigo unos meses antes, el resultado habría sido el contrario. Dadas las circunstancias, la mitad del dinero ha sido dividida entre los parientes más cercanos del señor Noel Vanstone, lo que significa en términos corrientes: entre mi marido y su pobre hermana inválida, quien aceptó el dinero formalmente un día para contentar al abogado y lo devolvió generosamente al siguiente

para contentarse a sí misma. Esto en cuanto a la mitad del legado. La otra mitad, querida, es toda tuya. ¡De qué manera tan extraña se desarrollan los acontecimientos, Magdalen! Sólo hace dos años que tú y yo nos convertimos en unas huérfanas desheredadas ¡y ahora nos repartimos la fortuna de nuestro padre después de todo!

- Espera un poco, Norah. A cada una su parte le llega de un modo diferente.

- ¿Eso crees? La mía me llega a través de mi marido. La tuya... -se interrumpió, confusa y avergonzada-. ¡Perdóname, cariño! -dijo, llevándose la mano de Magdalen a los labios-. He olvidado lo que debería haber recordado. ¡Te he afligido irreflexivamente!

- ¡No! -dijo Magdalen-. Me has dado valor.

- ¿Valor?

- Ahora lo verás.

Con estas palabras, se levantó tranquilamente del sofá y se dirigió a la ventana abierta. Antes de que Norah pudiera seguirla, había roto el fideicomiso en pedazos y había arrojado los fragmentos a la calle.

Magdalen volvió al sofá y apoyó la cabeza en el pecho de Norah con un hondo suspiro de alivio.

- No le deberé nada a mi vida pasada -dijo-. Me he despedido de ella como de esos trozos de papel rotos. ¡Todos los pensamientos, todas las esperanzas que puse en ella, los aparto de mí para siempre!

- ¡Magdalen! Mi marido no te lo permitirá; yo no te lo permitiré...

- ¡Calla, calla! Lo que tu marido considere correcto, Norah, tú y yo también lo consideraremos correcto. Aceptaré de ti lo que jamás habría aceptado si me lo hubiera dado esa carta. El final con el que soñaba ha llegado. Nada cambia, salvo la posición que en otro tiempo pensé que podríamos tener la una respecto de la otra. Mucho mejor así, cariño, ¡muchísimo mejor así!

Así fue como Magdalen realizó el último sacrifico de su antigua obstinación y su antiguo orgullo. Así fue cómo Magdalen entró en una nueva vida más noble.

Había transcurrido un mes. El sol otoñal brillaba incluso en las más lóbregas calles y los relojes de la vecindad daban las dos cuando Magdalen regresó sola a la casa de Aaron's Buildings.

- ¿Me está esperando? -preguntó ansiosamente cuando le abrió la patrona.

La esperaba en la salita del primer piso. Magdalen subió por las escaleras sigilosamente y llamó a la puerta. Él le dijo que entrara con tono indiferente y distraído, sin duda convencido de que era la criada pidiendo permiso para entrar en la habitación.

- ¿No me esperaba tan pronto? -dijo Magdalen desde el umbral de la puerta, deteniéndose allí para disfrutar de la expresión de sorpresa con que él se puso en pie y la miró.

Las únicas huellas de la enfermedad que aún eran visibles en el rostro de Magdalen habían suavizado su perfil añadiendo refinamiento a su belleza. Llevaba un sencillo vestido de muselina. Su vulgar sombrero de paja no llevaba más adorno que una cinta blanca. Ni siquiera en los mejores tiempos había estado tan encantadora como cuando avanzó hacia la mesa junto a la que él había estado sentado, llevando un cesto de flores que había recogido en la campiña, y le ofreció la mano.

Él, visto de cerca, parecía agobiado e inquieto. Magdalen interrumpió sus primeras felicitaciones y muestras de interés para preguntarle si se había quedado en Londres desde su despedida, si ni siquiera se había marchado unos cuantos días para ver a sus parientes de Suffolk. No, había permanecido en Londres desde entonces. Kirke no le

dijo que la bonita rectoría de Suffolk carecía de todos aquellos recuerdos de los que las míseras cuatro paredes de Aaron's Buildings estaban, en cambio, tan llenas. Sólo dijo que no se había movido de Londres.

- Me pregunto -dijo Magdalen, observando su cara con detenimiento- si está usted tan feliz de verme como yo de verlo a usted.

- Quizá más incluso, a mi modo peculiar -respondió él con una sonrisa.

Magdalen se quitó el sombrero y el pañuelo y se sentó una vez más en su sillón.

- Supongo que la calle es horriblemente fea -dijo-, y estoy segura de que nadie puede negar que la casa es muy pequeña. Sin embargo... sin embargo, me siento como si hubiera vuelto a casa. Siéntese aquí, donde solía sentarse. Háble me de usted. Quiero saber todo lo que ha hecho, incluso lo que ha pensado mientras yo estaba lejos. - Magdalen intentaba resumir la interminable retahíla de preguntas con la que estaba acostumbraba a convencerle de que hablara de sí mismo. Pero las formuló con mucha menos espontaneidad y destreza que de costumbre. Desde que entró en la habitación, una única preocupación absorbía sus pensamientos. Tras un cuarto de hora desperdiciado en preguntas turbadas por una parte y respuestas reticentes por la otra, Magdalen se arriesgó por fin a abordar el tema más peligroso.

- ¿Ha recibido las cartas que le envié desde la costa? -preguntó, apartando la vista de él repentinamente y por primera vez.

- Sí -dijo él-. Todas.

- ¿Las ha leído?

- Todas y cada una de ellas, varias veces.

El corazón de Magdalen latía con tanta velocidad que le pareció que estaba a punto de ahogarse. Había mantenido su promesa valientemente. Toda la historia de su vida, desde la época del desastre familiar en Combe-Raven hasta el momento en que había destruido el fideicomiso secreto en presencia de su hermana, todo se lo había expuesto. No le había ocultado nada que hubiera hecho ni nada que hubiera pensado. Del mismo modo que él habría cumplido una promesa que le hubiese hecho a ella, así había cumplido Magdalen su promesa hacia él. No le había fallado la voluntad para hacerlo, pero le fallaba entonces para hacer la pregunta decisiva por la que se encontraba allí. Aunque su deseo de saber si lo había ganado o lo había perdido era muy fuerte, más fuerte aún era por el momento el miedo de saberlo. Aguardó temblorosa sin decir nada más.

- ¿Puedo hablarle de sus cartas? -preguntó él-. ¿Puedo decirle...?

Si Magdalen le hubiera mirado mientras él pronunciaba esas pocas palabras, habría visto en su expresión lo que pensaba de ella. Habría visto que, pese a la inocencia de Kirke en los asuntos mundanos, conocía el valor inestimable y la virtud ennoblecedora de una mujer que decía la verdad. Pero Magdalen no tuvo valor para mirarle, para alzar los ojos del regazo.

- Todavía no -dijo débilmente-. No tan pronto, cuando hace tan poco que nos hemos vuelto a ver.

Magdalen se levantó bruscamente y se acercó a la ventana, volvió de nuevo y se acercó a donde él estaba sentado, junto a la mesa. El recado de escribir, esparcido sobre ésta, le dio un pretexto para cambiar de asunto y Magdalen lo aprovechó al instante.

- ¿Estaba escribiendo una carta cuando he llegado? -preguntó.

- Estaba pensando en ello -respondió él-. No era una carta que pudiera escribirse sin reflexionar. -Se levantó mientras contestaba para recoger el recado de escribir y guardarlo.

- ¿Por qué habría de interrumpirle? -dijo Magdalen-. ¿Por qué no me deja que intente ayudarle? ¿Es un secreto?

- No, no es un secreto.

Kirke vaciló al responderle. Inmediatamente, Magdalen adivinó la verdad.

- ¿Es sobre su barco?

Poco adivinaba Kirke cuánto había pensado Magdalen durante su separación en el asunto que él creía haberle ocultado. Poco adivinaba que Magdalen había aprendido ya a ponerse celosa de su barco.

- ¿Quieren que regrese a su antigua vida? -prosiguió Magdalen-. ¿Quieren que vuelva a hacerse a la mar? ¿Tiene que contestar sí o no de inmediato?

- De inmediato.

- Si no hubiera entrado en el momento en que lo he hecho, ¿habría dicho que sí?

Sin darse cuenta, Magdalen posó una mano sobre el brazo del marino, olvidando toda consideración menor en su deseo de oír sus siguientes palabras. La confesión de su amor estuvo en un tris de escapársele, pero Kirke se reprimió aún. «Me da igual por mí -pensó-. Pero ¿cómo sé que no la molestaré?»

- ¿Habría dicho que sí? -repitió ella.

- Dudaba -respondió él-. Dudaba entre el sí y el no.

La mano de Magdalen se cerró sobre el brazo del marino; un súbito temblor se adueñó de todos sus miembros; ya no podía soportarlo más. El corazón se le escapó por la boca cuando pronunció sus siguientes palabras:

- ¿Dudaba por mi causa?

- Sí -dijo él-. Acepte mi confesión a cambio de la suya. Dudaba por su causa.

Magdalen no dijo nada más, sólo le miró. La verdad alcanzó por fin a Kirke con aquella mirada. En un momento, Magdalen estaba rodeada por sus brazos y derramaba exquisitas lágrimas de alegría con el rostro oculto sobre el pecho del marino.

- ¿Acaso merezco tanta felicidad? -musitó Magdalen, haciendo por fin la pregunta-. Oh, sé lo que contestarían las pobres gentes de miras estrechas, que jamás han sentido ni han sufrido, si les preguntara lo que te pregunto a ti. Si esas personas conocieran mi historia, olvidarían la provocación y recordarían sólo la falta; se cebarían en mi pecado y pasarían por alto todos mis sufrimientos. Pero tú no eres uno de ellos, ¿verdad? ¡Dime si te queda alguna sombra de duda! ¡Dime si dudas de que el sincero propósito de mi vida futura es hacerme digna de ti! Te pedí que esperaras a verme; te pedí que, si había alguna dura verdad que decir, me la dijeras aquí de tus propios labios. ¡Dímelo, amor mío, mi marido! ¡Dímelo ahora!

Magdalen alzó la vista, aferrada a él como a la esperanza de una vida mejor.

- ¡Dime la verdad! -repitió Magdalen.

- ¿De mis propios labios?

- ¡Sí! -respondió ella con vehemencia-. Dime lo que piensas de mí con tus propios labios.

Él se inclinó y la besó.

FIN

Se refiere a La dama de blanco (The Woman in White, 1860), que tuvo un éxito inmediato y multitudinario. (N. de la T.)

El tren mixto. Tren con vagones de pasajeros de distintas clases (N. de la T.)

Cuerpo que no pertenece al ejército regular, en el que se entrena a los hombres como soldados para servir únicamente en su propio país en tiempo de guerra. (N. de la T.)

Escuela de segunda enseñanza financiada mediante donativos privados. (N. de la T.)

Los rivales (*The Rivals*, 1775), comedia de enredo de Richard Sheridan (1751-1816). En ella se oponen el carácter y vicisitudes de dos jóvenes heroínas, Julia Nelville, juiciosa y sentimental, y Lydia Languish, apasionada y novelesca. La primera soporta estoicamente los terribles celos y desmanes de su enamorado Falkland; en cambio la segunda, deseosa de grandes lances y aventuras, pretende ser amada en secreto, raptada incluso, por un hombre que renuncie a su dote. El capitán Absolute finge, pues, para conquistarla, ser el pobre y desgraciado alférez Beverley, y como tal es rechazado por la tía de Lydia, la señora Malaprop, con gran felicidad de la joven, que ve así su amor magníficamente obstaculizado. No obstante, el padre del capitán, sir Anthony Absolute, planea la boda de su hijo con Lydia, a lo que se aviene la señora Malaprop, pero con la condición de que el joven se encargue antes de ahuyentar a su «rival» Beverley. Las cosas se complican de tal modo que el pobre capitán ha de llegar al extremo de desafiarse en duelo a sí mismo; pero al final el enredo se aclara y la obra tiene un final feliz. (N. de la T.)

Humphry Clinker, de T. G. Smollett, es una novela de tintes realistas y aire satírico contrapuestos al tono de *The Tears of Sensibility*, traducción de una novela sentimental francesa. (N. de la T.)

Tren lento y barato. Una ley del Parlamento obligaba a todas las compañías de ferrocarriles a poner en servicio uno de tales trenes diariamente (N. de la T.)

Restaurantes especializados en servir chuletas y filetes. (N. de la T.)

Paso marítimo de océano Atlántico al océano Pacífico (estrecho de Bering) a través del océano Glacial Ártico, recorrido por primera vez por Roald Amundsen de 1903 a 1906. No se había hallado aún, por tanto, en la época en que se escribió la novela (N. de la T.)

En 1846 se produjo un auge espectacular en las inversiones ferroviarias. Cuando cayeron las acciones, muchos inversores quedaron arruinados. (N. de la T.)

Téngase en cuenta que en Inglaterra también se llama té a la cena ligera que se sirve al final de la tarde, con la que puede, efectivamente, tomarse un té. (N. de la T.)

Profesionales que investigaban la veracidad de las declaraciones de pobreza alegadas para recibir subsidios. Los contrataba la Sociedad para la Supresión de Mendicidad que se fundó en 1818. (N. de la T.)

Charles Matthews (1776-1835), famoso por su versatilidad en la interpretación de distintos papeles en una misma función. (N. de la T.)

Carbonato de amonio. Las sales aromáticas eran un compuesto de carbonato de amonio, amoníaco y perfume y se utilizaban como estimulante. (N. de la T.)

La muerte de Baltasar, rey de Babilonia e hijo de Nabucodonosor, fue profetizada por una misteriosa inscripción en los muros de su palacio (Daniel, 5) (N. de la T.)

John Wesley (1703-1791). Reformador inglés que fundó el metodismo, doctrina religiosa que surgió de sus predicaciones y con la que pretendía reformar la Iglesia anglicana. (N. de la T.)

Semiesferas de goma o corcho coronadas de plumas que se utilizan para jugar al badminton, también llamado juego del volante. (N. de la T.)

Medicamento que se utilizaba antiguamente como supurativo, cuyo componente básico era la colofonia. (N. de la T.)

Diálogos científicos de Joyce. Publicado en 1807, este manual de divulgación científica fue muy conocido y leído en la época. (N. de la T.)

Abreviatura de la expresión latina *Verbum satis sapiente*: «Una palabra basta para un hombre sabio». (N. de la T.)

Expresión latina «Que dure para siempre» (N. de la T.)

Ahora llamado mar del Norte. (N. de la T.)

George Crabbe. Poeta inglés (1754-1832). Pastor anglicano, autor de obras satíricas y realistas, aunque con tintes románticos. (N. de la T.)

«El arte es eterno, la vida breve» (N. de la T.)

La cita completa es de Shakespeare: *«All the world's stage, And all the men and women merely players»* («El mundo entero es un teatro, y todos los hombres y mujeres meros actores»), de su obra *Como gustéis*, acto II, escena VII. (N. de laT.)

Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re: «Dulce en las maneras, firme en los hechos». (N. de la T.)

Cualquier artista europeo de importancia del período comprendido entre el siglo XVI y principios del XVIII, sobre todo uno de los grandes pintores. (N. de la T.)

En las antiguas iglesias inglesas los bancos podían tener puertas y las familias los alquilaban o los tenían en propiedad. (N. de la T.)

Diccionario o índice geográfico. (N. de la T.)

El norte en este caso se refiere a Escocia, donde se encuentra Dumfries. (N. de la T.)

Wilkie Collins reproduce con este personaje la forma de hablar y las variantes dialectales del inglés que usan los escoceses, imposibles de reproducir en la versión castellana. (N. de la T.)

«Tenía un bello cuerpo masculino, tenía un corazón de oro; abajo Tom cumplía con su deber lealmente, pero ahora ha subido a la arboladura -¡pero ahora ha subido a la arboladura!»

La cirugía ha entrado a formar parte de los estudios médicos en tiempos modernos. Antiguamente, la cirugía carecía de prestigio y los médicos consideraban que era una tarea baja, propia de barberos. (N. de la T.)

La Anunciación de la Virgen se celebra el día 25 de marzo, que coincide con uno de los días en los que se solían efectuar pagos trimestrales, como los alquileres. (N. de la T.)

Se refiere a las de diversos árboles que se usan para curtir pieles. (N. de la T.)

«En tanto que vivimos, vivamos.» (N. de la T.)

Nombres de plantas. Tanto el jugo resinoso del áloe, como la gomorresina de la escamonea y de la gutagamba se utilizaban como purgantes. (N. de la T.)

Se refiere a Eduardo, príncipe de Gales, y a su hermano el duque de York, que fueron asesinados por orden de su tío, Ricardo III. (N. de la T.)